THE Hudson REVIEW

JOHN N. MORRIS:
Samuel Johnson and the Artist's Work

A. R. AMMONS:
Pray Without Ceasing—a long poem

BERT O. STATES:
The Word-Pictures in Hamlet

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Fallacies of Silence

PHILIP HOBSBAUM:
British Poetry Now

Poems by WILLIAM MEREDITH, WILLIAM STAFFORD, HILDA MORLEY, JAMES MERRILL, JAMES WRIGHT, RICHMOND LATTIMORE, JOYCE CAROL OATES.

Reviews by STEPHEN FARBER, MARCIA B. SIEGEL, MOIRA HODGSON, MARVIN MUDRICK, JAMES DEGNAN, WILLIAM H. YOUNGREN, WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD.

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JOYCE CAROL OATES' most recent volume of poetry is *Angel Fire* (Louisiana State University).

Someday, Maybe, WILLIAM STAFFORD's most recent collection of poems, was published by Harper & Row this spring. Last fall he traveled to Egypt, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Nepal under the auspices of the U.S.I.A. to read and lecture on the literary scene in the United States. Mr. Stafford teaches at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon.

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Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

The publication of the Jaime de Angulo Library may be of particular interest to some of the older readers of THE HUDSON REVIEW. One of de Angulo's most important essays, *Indians in Overalls,* first appeared in THE HUDSON REVIEW in the Autumn of 1950; and the publication of *Indians in Overalls* helped pave the way for the A. A. Wyn (now Hill & Wang) edition of de Angulo's classic, *Indian Tales.* Although *Indian Tales* was only one of a number of manuscripts de Angulo prepared for publication during the last few years of his life, the story of the wandering Bear party is his only text to appear in book form up until this time. The publication of the Jaime de Angulo Library is then the first full-scale presentation of the work of one of America's finest poet-anthropologists—"The American Ovid," according to Ezra Pound.

De Angulo began his professional career with a medical degree from Johns Hopkins in 1912. After a brief tour of duty with the US Medical Corps—where he became acquainted with the ideas of Carl Jung and taught an early course on Jungian Psychiatry at the Ann Arbor College for Army Physicians—de Angulo's interest shifted to native American medical practices, and his life-long fascination with the magic of the Indian healing process was nourished and sustained by forty years of intimate study with the Doctor/Shaman of Modoc County in the Sierra mountain region of northeastern California. Indeed de Angulo's preoccupation with the terrible power of the "tinihowi" (the mysterious spirit force that quickens and informs life) and the "damaagome" (the same force controlled and manipulated by the sure hand of a shaman) is the underlying subject of almost all his later novels, poems and essays.

In the early work, however, de Angulo's primary area of concentration was Indian language and linguistics. A Spaniard by birth, and educated in Paris as a young boy, de Angulo was already fluent in three languages when he began his field work at the urging of Franz Boas and Paul Radin in the early twenties. During the next seven years he was able to publish short papers on seventeen different native American languages, and in many cases his early linguistic models still stand. An anarchist at heart, and victim of the first post-world war "red scare," de Angulo was never offered a permanent university position; and so in time he turned more and more to the small literary magazine as a natural outlet for his work.

Willard Johnson, the editor of the now legendary *Laughing Horse* from Santa Fe, was an early de Angulo enthusiast; at Johnson's request de Angulo—along with D. H. Lawrence, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and

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Haniel Long—became a regular contributor to the magazine in the late twenties. For the rest of his life de Angulo continued to contribute to a number of small literary magazines; and in time a number of highly discriminating critics—Marianne Moore and Henry Miller, e.e. cummings and William Carlos Williams—all took an active interest in his work. At one point Ezra Pound offered to edit a short series of modern classics to include the work of Wyndham Lewis, Gaudier, and the unpublished Jaime de Angulo. It is, I feel, relatively easy to understand Pound's enthusiasms—for in all de Angulo's work one can find the clarity of perception which Pound and others have long associated with Classicism.

In spite of Pound's interest, and the critical acclaim given to *Indian Tales* upon publication ("a book of sheer poetry", Marjorie Snyder, *Boston Herald;* "the author knew profoundly and at first hand the ethnology and old ways of his people", Oliver La Farge, *The New York Times;* "As a student of folklore de Angulo has no peer", John Henry Jackson, *San Francisco Chronicle*) the collected writings of Jaime de Angulo have been sitting in a few cardboard boxes in a closet in Berkeley, California—unpublished and all but forgotten—for the last twenty years.

The first edition of the Jaime de Angulo Library—edited under the supervision of his widow, the late Nancy Freeland de Angulo—contains three volumes of essays—including *Indians in Overalls*; two unpublished novels based on early Spanish/Indian contact on the coast of Big Sur; three new volumes of Indian Tales; and a volume of de Angulo's collected poems tentatively entitled "Shaman Songs." As the first edition of the Library is being printed by Clifford Burke at Cranium Press in a special letter press edition of one thousand, and the books are being made available on a mail-order basis only, the reader is advised to write to Turtle Island Foundation, 2907 Bush Street, San Francisco, Ca. 94115 for further details.

BOB CALLAHAN/Editor
Jaime de Angulo Library

San Francisco, Cal.

Ed. note—In connection with the above letter, it may be appropriate to note for the record that the original typescript of "Indians in Overalls " was given to me personally by Ezra Pound when I visited him at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in the winter of 1949-50, and was edited by me for publication, with the approval of the author. —F.M.

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JOHN N. MORRIS

Samuel Johnson and the Artist's Work

I PREACH, I HOPE, to the converted—to those who would be unwilling to accept unquestioningly, even upon the authority of Professor Rene Wellek, the damaging intent of the dictum that Samuel Johnson is a critic "who has almost ceased to understand the nature of art, and who, in central passages, treats art as life." As a more recent writer, Mr. Emerson R. Marks, puts the matter, "it is hard to imagine an indictment more destructive to the reputation of a literary critic." For the good reasons that they themselves provide, neither Wellek nor Marks is willing to proceed to the verdict that such an indictment would seem to invite. To their remarks and those of some other writers on Johnson's criticism I should like to add only the suggestion that what in their view appears the near-fatal defect of that criticism may in fact be a principal ground of interest in it. I mean simply that it makes more sense than we usually suppose to believe that in some of its aspects art indeed *is* life and that therefore we need not be defensive or ingeniously argumentative in our dealings with Johnson's exemplifications of this view of the matter.

To such an understanding of Johnson historians of criticism can in the nature of the case provide almost no assistance. For them he must be first of all an instance of something, a "representative figure" to be praised or blamed as he does or does not express the writer's notion of what "Augustanism" or the "neo-classical temper" is, or as he forwards or impedes the progress of criticism toward some present or future state of perfection. Such assessments cannot satisfy, for the particulars of Johnson's achievement resist assimilation to any theory. Nor will it do to adopt the opposite strategy and in an apparent effort to magnify Johnson's claims on our attention exempt him altogether from history and ground in his uniqueness a special freedom from our responsible judgement. Such apparent generosity is the worst kind of insult: it refuses to take Johnson seriously. It produces the Johnson of Lytton

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Strachey's characteristic formulation, the Johnson who "has managed to be wrong so cleverly, that nobody minds."

In fact, of course, Johnson abides our question as Shakespeare abides his. But the question should express some willingness to suppose that a notion of art that differs from one's own may have something to recommend it. Johnson's own occasional practice notwithstanding, to contradict is not to refute.

Art proposes itself to Johnson in at least—at *least*—two guises. It is something a man does, something he makes; and it is something that has been done, something made. However high its dignity, a work of art, like a killing or a candlestick, is to be judged as a piece of behaviour or as an article of manufacture or both.

Moreover, art is for Johnson heavily *circumstanced*. It comes to us in history, through history. It has causes and it has effects. It is, in short, contingent, not autonomous. This conception of the matter, which to some modern sensibilities may seem a radical insult upon art, permits for Johnson its highest claim on our attention. For those circumstances are *human*. To Johnson, as to anyone who conceives of art as imitation, the one most certain thing about a poem is that it is not Nature but a representation of it. In this simple and obvious sense, art is inferior to Nature, or secondary to it. But equally art is what Nature cannot produce. The making of it is a peculiarly human activity, and therein lies its dignity.

But to that dignity other peculiarly human activities may also pretend, and as we judge a man's good or ill success at such other activities so may we judge his success as an artist. The production of art—and literary art in particular—may be for Johnson the noblest expression of our creaturely talents. *Paradise Lost,* he says, is "a poem which, considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind." The poem here is considered as achievement, as distinctively human achievement. But if a poem is an achievement, so in its own measure is every other made thing, every other product of our skill and ingenuity. Thus it is that for Johnson the fact that Milton sometimes found it easy to compose and sometimes difficult is at last to be assimilated to the day-to-day variations in skill and craft of hand of any artisan. Milton's "bursts of light, and involutions of darkness," he writes, are common "to every man in every mode of exertion, manual or mental. The mechanic cannot handle his hammer and his file at

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all times with equal dexterity; there are hours, he knows not why, when *his hand is out.*" But if the poet like the mechanic must acknowledge the fact of occasional mysterious checks on his power to practice his art, he should, again like his humbler brother, recognize that the checks are *only* occasional and that in the normal course of things much is always in his power: "a man may write at any time, if he will set himself *doggedly* to it." (Johnson does not suppose that doggedness will produce a *Paradise Lost;* but it will produce *something.*) To conceive of the work of art as the artist's work, to compare the artist to the artisan, is not to depress the dignity of the former but to raise it, for the enterprise of the one, like that of the other, is seen to lie largely (though not entirely) within the scope of will.

From the limitations on human will arise the limitations of the artist. Johnson perceives everything under the aspect of limitation. He must examine "the defects and faults of *Paradise Lost*—for faults and defects every work of man must have." The particulars of the indictment are telling, but because they are no greater than those that the poem as a work of man must in the nature of the case display, they do not weigh heavily in his estimate of the work. Elsewhere Johnson observes that:

> Every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived, and with his own particular opportunities; and though to the reader a book be no better or worse for the circumstances of the author, yet as there is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities, and the enquiry, how far man may extend his designs, or how high he may rate his native force, is of far greater dignity than in what rank we shall place any particular performance, curiosity is always busy to discover the instruments, as well as to survey the workmanship, to know how much is to be ascribed to original powers, and how much to casual and adventitious help. The palaces of *Peru* or *Mexico* were certainly mean and incommodious habitations, if compared to the houses of *European* monarchs; yet who could forebear to view them with astonishment, who remembered that they were built without the use of iron?

It is a little surprising to remember that the occasion of these reflections, the man whose productions are to be judged as generously as "every man's," is Shakespeare. Shakespeare is to be forgiven much, for he is a man—and a man in Time. For the same reasons he is to be praised. Shakespeare here is interesting to John-

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son as a study in "how far man may extend his designs"—in how far Shakespeare has advanced the frontiers of human possibility. Thus considered, Shakespeare resembles that other Johnson of whom Johnson speaks, the Johnson who rode on three horses at once: "his performances shew the extent of human powers in one instance," says Johnson, "and thus tend to raise our opinion of the faculties of man. . . . Everything that enlarges the sphere of human powers, that shows a man he can do what he thought he could not do, is valuable."

Our powers, then, our potentiality as actors in the world and therefore as moral agents, are what Johnson is chiefly interested in—our powers and the limitations upon them that history and our creaturely condition impose. Both Shakespeare's and the trick-rider's performances are to be estimated in the light of circumstance, the larger reality that at last confines and, by confining, defines the achievement of every talent, every will. For however far human designs may be extended, there is somewhere a limit. Milton could not make himself the greatest epic poet; for he could not make himself the first one.

The limitations imposed upon even a Shakespeare or a Milton by history and his creaturely condition are an aspect of that "general nature" of which Johnson makes so much, that including reality of which every person and every *datum* is a part. They are categories in which we have our being. Such assimilations of a fact to its circumstances, of the peculiar to the general, are of course to be found everywhere in Johnson. "[P]erhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from one another," he says in praise of Shakespeare. But in a sentence earlier in the Preface he proposes a complementary proposition that falls strangely on some ears: "In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species." A printer's error, says the alert undergraduate: the positions of *an individual* and *a species* have been reversed. But it is no mistake. For Johnson, what is most interesting to the poet is what men have in common with one another; and among the things interesting about the poet himself is what he has in common with other men—the conditions on which he holds title to his life and the responsibilities that his talent, in the exercise of which will is so heavily implicated, entails.

Johnson's insistence upon the limitations that nature and our

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natures enforce upon us accounts for many of his darkest sentences. "The doom of man," of the species, will not be "revers'd" for the sake of any particular person, he says in "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Those phrases at the beginning of that poem about the "clouded maze of fate," a maze that is, moreover, "o'erspread with snares," we conventionally compare with the passage that opens Pope's *Essay on Man*. Pope's "scene of Man" is also a maze, but a "mighty" one. In the course of making the comparison we notice in Pope the element of aesthetic wonder signalized by that admiring "mighty" and his assertion of confidence (perhaps a slightly *desperate* confidence) that the maze is "not without a plan." Pope's comforts (if that is what they are) are not easily available to Johnson. Johnson cannot regard his "survey," as Pope does his, as a matter of setting forth to bag "Folly as it flies." Pope, to be sure, does not long sustain his genial tone; but Johnson can never assume it.

The point of juxtaposing the two poets' employment of similar images is obviously to dramatize the relative darkness of Johnson's poem. As a pedagogic device the comparison is useful though not entirely fair to either poet. Indeed, there is a sense in which the "doctrine" of Pope's poem, or of part of it, may be seen to set yet narrower limits on our freedom than those that Johnson recognizes. The "Ruling Passion," that "favorite theory" of Pope's, says Johnson, is "pernicious as well as false," for "its tendency is to produce the belief of a kind of moral predestination." What Johnson is reproving here is the temptation that Pope's theory, at least in Johnson's understanding of it, appears to offer to indulgence in the consolations of pessimism. It is not an uninteresting temptation; and it is full of attraction for modern readers. It is a *relief* to know —or think one knows—that there are limits on what one may, by taking thought, do about one's character. To twentieth-century eyes the theory of the Ruling Passion may seem crude or naive. But it bears comparison with the Freudian notion, or the notion derivable from Freud, that there is some irreducible darkness in us, a darkness for which, because its source is biological, we are not responsible, some portion of the *id* where (Freud's own hopeful, imperious commandment to the contrary) *ego* can never be. With such comforts, or with any easy and vulgar form of them, Johnson will have nothing to do. A theory of the Ruling Passion or its Freudian cousin relinquishes too much. Thus to acquiesce in limi-

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tation is to trivialize oneself; it is to be guilty in a more important way of what Johnson calls the "fantastick foppery" of Gray who, somewhat like a Milton, believed "that he could not write but at certain times, or at happy moments." It is to be a kind of machine.

But in the acceptance of another kind of comfort Johnson and the Pope of *An Essay on Man* are, I think, largely at one. Johnson's critique of the notion of the Great Chain of Being in his review of Soame Jenyns' *Free Enquiry*—a book he took to be a prose redaction of Pope's poem—is familiar enough. But I think that Johnson might well concur in the spirit at least of Pope's refreshment of that ancient idea in the third epistle of his poem, his re-imagination of it as the chain of *love*. For in this passage Pope embraces the notion of the insufficiencies of creatures as the occasion of that greater good, a social order, a social order that in the first instance is composed not only of men but of all created nature. It does not matter much that in the Life of Pope this section of the poem is said simply to proclaim "that if the world be made for man, it may be said that man was made for geese." There is of course something ludicrous about such lines as "The fur that warms a monarch, warmed a bear"; and Johnson is perhaps right in suggesting —of this and the poem at large—that "a man of no very comprehensive search may venture to say that he has heard all this before." But the proposition that out of weakness strengths may arise is, it seems to me, essentially Johnsonian. And though Johnson's interest in that proposition centers always in *human* weakness and strength, his highly imagistic imagination perpetually seeks in the wider world of the natural analogs to our condition. Johnson's prose is thick with passages in which a final clause realizes as it concludes a sentence or paragraph of general truth, and realizes it by seeking in the community of creation identities with the actions and characteristics of men. For we are members of nature; and it is partly by right of our imperfection that we are joined in that society, participating in the consolations of community.

And it is by right of our imperfection that we claim what is peculiar to us, our special dignity. Our flaw, like that of Oedipus, is that we are not gods. Johnson would not think of the matter in such terms. But surely, in some form of words, he would agree that what gives meaning to the things we do is the fact that we cannot do everything, that indeed we can do very little; and that life is valuable because it has an end. For Johnson, of course, the fact

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that he would die was too fearful a thing to be thus easily "philosophized" about. Still, death is for Johnson, in the famous instance of Dr. Dodd, something that "concentrates the mind wonderfully." Dodd, of course, knew when he was to die, but the difference between his case and Johnson's matters little. "I have done nothing," Johnson says in the *Prayers and Meditations;* "the need of doing therefore is pressing, since the time of doing is short." The need of doing is for Johnson a Christian imperative: "I know not what has become of the last year. . . . This is not the life to which heaven is promised." But within the Christian context or outside of it, awareness of our mortality is what first of all gives significance to our lives because, like the Tree in Eden, it lays us under the necessity of choice and thereby guarantees that, like the heroes in Homer, we are superior in point of moral interest not only to the beasts but to the gods—and indeed to any angels but Milton's.

To his lively sense of human limitation is owing one distinctive characteristic of Johnson's critical judgements—their large charity. Johnson is able—even eager—to discover merit where modern readers and Johnson's contemporaries have found little to praise. Of Ambrose Phillips, for example, Johnson remarks that "at least half his book deserves to be read." Rowe's *Pharsalia* deserves "more notice than it obtains"; it has faults, but they are a condition of its being, for "faults are to be expected in all translations." George Stepney's poems contain "little either of the grace of wit, or the vigour of nature"; still, "a happy line may perhaps be found, and now and then a short composition may give pleasure." It can be argued that such moderate praise expresses nothing more than Johnson's condescension to practitioners beneath his serious critical attention. And those passages quoted here from the *Lives of the Poets* occur in final, valedictory paragraphs, where, as in lapidary inscriptions, a man may not be upon oath. But perhaps Johnson's willingness to be pleased—or at any rate not offended—expresses, not merely an uncharacteristic and contemptuous tolerance of the second-rate, but a willingness to allow to those who do not pretend to too much the merits, such as they are, of their achievements. Johnson's judgement of men's works, that is to say, derives in part from his estimate of men, of human powers as they are shared by the generality of us. It is indeed a moral judgment; it arises from Johnson's sense that there is nothing too little for so little a creature as man.

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Johnson's praise, obviously, is no insult; and, broadly speaking, his blame is a compliment of sorts. He commonly reserves it for authors who, whatever his final judgment of them, command at least a measure of his respect. Johnson's strictures on Gray, for instance, are in part to be understood as a kind of parable of the talents, in which the poet figures as the unprofitable servant. "What signifies so much knowledge, when it produced so little? Is it worth taking so much pains to have no memorial but a few poems?" The words are not Johnson's, but Johnson reproduces them; and the *Life* suggests that the question here raised is at best an open one. But the talent, the knowledge, the pains—these Johnson never denies. "Had Gray often written thus," he says of the *Elegy*," it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him." It is partly because the odes are not the equals of the *Elegy* that Johnson so sternly criticizes them, applying to them a standard derived from their author's own best practice. "There is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities." Johnson says in the "Preface to Shakespeare." The judgement Johnson passes on Gray constitutes a particular application of this general truth. For the *Elegy* is the measure of one man's "human abilities," and to the rest of his productions, when they are referred to it for comparison, it stands as a reproach.

As with Gray, so with Pope. Johnson deals more strictly with some of Pope's poems than he does with those of, say, Pomfret; but he does so partly because Pope has himself established in his most successful works a high standard of attainment by which to be judged. Johnson makes much of the "penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment" in *An Essay on Man* largely because in no other literary work have these qualities been "so happily disguised." Certain passages in the poem "enchain philosophy, suspend criticism, and oppress judgement by overpowering pleasure"; it is therefore just to point out that the poem likewise "contains more lines unsuccessfully laboured, more harshness of diction, and more heaviness without strength, than will easily be found in all his other works." With such an enemy, who needs a friend? Thus to be blamed for concentrating most of your faults in one poem—and that poem itself an "instance of the predominance of genius"—is in a way to be eulogized.

The point, I hope, is reasonably clear. It is the dignity and misery of the poet to engage not only his creaturely and historical

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limitations, which he shares with others, but also the limitations, personal to him, of his talent. The more properly on one occasion he deserves praise, the more surely on another he will be blamed. "Had [*Paradise Regained*] been written not by Milton, but by some imitator," says Johnson, "it would have claimed and received universal praise." But as a work of Milton's it is in some measure deficient: it is not *Paradise Lost*. Of this irony of the literary life, as of many others. Johnson is feelingly aware. But what seems to matter most in Johnson's view is the play that the poet makes with the difficult. The great poet—the Milton, the Shakespeare—is the man whose works (or even one of them) mark a kind of era in the history not of art only but of human possibility. *Paradise Lost,* that is to say, as an object of aesthetic contemplation, is what it magnificently is, faults and all. But it has also an existence beyond the literary, not as artifact but deed. Johnson judges it not only as a poem but as an event, a moral conquest after which, as after other kinds of conquest, nothing will ever be quite the same.

In thus conceiving of the work of literature as action, as event, Johnson licenses his own practice as censor as well as celebrant. Just here, I think, the objections to Johnson's "moralism" have—or at first *appear* to have—a point. At least occasionally he blames or praises poets, not poems. But of course Johnson can draw the line. A sentence from his *Life of Akenside* is commonly adduced as evidence of his clear-sightedness in these matters: "With the philosophical or religious tenets of the author I have nothing to do; my business is with poetry." And the Milton whose poetry he so admires he describes as "a severe and arbitrary" husband and father, "an acrimonious and surly republican" whose political views express an "envious hatred of greatness" and whose "predominant desire was to destroy rather than establish."

But if Johnson does not equate the good poet with the good man, he does, I think, perceive the good poem as good deed, as virtuous action—and the bad poem, or at any rate the poem that is bad in certain ways, as moral offense. His judgements, then, are first of all judgements of poems, they are still literary. But they are not only that. Their moral resonance (not all of them, to be sure, possess it) constitutes an accession of seriousness that does honor to the art to which Johnson is attending (if not always to the specimen of it under his eye) and to the one he is practicing.

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The kind of literary badness that prompts Johnson's moral censure is not usually a matter of simple ineptitude or mediocrity. To that, as we have seen, he is often charitable. It is *active* badness that Johnson reproves (as it is active virtue that he praises). Poems that are busy about the wrong things, poems that have about them the shine of ostentation, that draw the wrong kind of attention to themselves and to their authors—these are the works that provoke his severity. One advantage that Shakespeare has over Addison, for instance, is that "*Addison* speaks the language of poets, and *Shakespeare,* of men." The apparent depreciation of poetry here suggested issues, I think, from Johnson's sense of some self-regarding quality of Addison's work. "We find in *Cato* innumerable beauties which enamour us of its author," he continues; ". . . the composition refers us only to the writer; we pronounce the name of *Cato,* but we think on *Addison.*"

In short, what Johnson objects to is the poet whose work stands in some improper relationship to his self, the poet who covertly encourages his reader to think first of *him,* not of the poem itself or its subject. Of the Gray of the *Odes,* for example, Johnson asserts: "The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence. . . . He has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tiptoe. His art and his struggle are too visible. . . ." The figure of speech in which we identify a poem with its author is usually a mere convenience. But here it seems to carry meaning. What is immediately visible in the poems is the poet himself as he sets about ludicrously to enlarge and dignify himself. Johnson does not use the word, but it appears that for him one defect of the *Odes* is that they are full of pride.

With Johnson's low opinion of Gray's *Odes* many nowadays are happy to agree. But we may incline to quarrel with his application of these sanctions to such poets and poems as he touches on in, say the *Life of Cowley.* Johnson's views of the metaphysical poets have, as everyone knows, given scandal to many a twentieth-century reader; I shall not here rehearse that great debate. But it may be worthwhile to attend for a moment to the tone in which Johnson utters his pronouncements, for I believe that it is chiefly that tone that has caused distress.

Read simply as descriptions of a set of literary phenomena, many of Johnson's statements on the subject are unexceptionable, though perhaps incomplete and therefore (like all other critical

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assertions) not fully adequate to their occasions. When Johnson remarks that these poets are full of learning, that they are often obscure, that their analogies are far-fetched, that their minds are analytical, that they delight in the particular, who is to argue? He is seeing the same things that we see. But the language in which he expresses those perceptions gives trouble, for it reveals that he is perceiving something else too, something invisible to us or, if visible, something we have come to ignore or forgive or even admire. To Johnson, metaphysical poetry (or much of it; we must not forget his praise) seems largely a culpable assertion of self.

So much his insistence on one theme makes clear. The "whole endeavour" of these poets, he says, was "to show their learning," and he complains of "their desire of exciting admiration." To show that learning, to excite that admiration, "they sought only for novelty"; "their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before." They sought, in short, to be original.

I hope that at this late date no one still supposes Johnson to have been an enemy of originality. But to be original in the fashion of a Cowley or a Donne is, for Johnson, to be original in the wrong way. In their desire to display their personal distinction these poets set themselves apart from their audience, that common reader by whom, as we remember, "must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours." "As they were wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising, they had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and pleasures of other minds. . . ." The defect of this sort of originality, then, is its deficiency in imagination. The minds of these poets refuse to connect themselves with ours. This is at once a literary and a moral fault, and it is the one because it is the other. Johnson proceeds to accuse the metaphysicals of an inhuman coldness: "they never inquired what, on any occasion, they should have said or done, but wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature; as beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure; as Epicurean deities, making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest and without emotion. Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow."

Among the issues raised here is that famous bugbear, the question of sincerity in poetry. But what strikes me most strongly

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in the sentences I have quoted is Johnson's identification of the central "failure" of the metaphysical poets as a willed denial of a part of their humanity. They write "as beholders," "as Epicurean deities." They survey life "without interest"—in the eighteenth-century sense of that term as denoting shared concerns. In thus setting themselves apart from the rest of us, they seek to set themselves above us. Impossible of success, such attempts at magnification of the self, like other acts of pride, in fact diminish it.

But despite the coldness and impassivity of these remote "beholders," their poetry, in Johnson's description of it, is full of activity. It is full of energy; but the energy is misapplied. The poems are *about* nothing: "they cannot be said to have imitated anything; they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter nor represented the operations of intellect." Theirs is the Uncreating Word: "Their attempts were always analytic; they broke every image into fragments; and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sunbeam with a prism can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon." All is will and busyness—and force. "The most heterogeneous ideas," as everyone remembers, "are *yoked* by *violence* together; nature and art are *ransacked*. . . ." This "perverseness of industry" is a kind of parody of creative vigor. It does not imitate nature; it rearranges it, it interferes, it fiddles with it.

Johnson's conclusion is at last an aesthetic one: these writers "fail to give delight." And in poetry what fails to give delight, fails. But what Johnson has attempted to analyze is the reason for that failure, which he takes to be a moral one. Whatever may have been the tenor of their lives in general, these poets, in these poems, behave wrongly. The section in the *Life of Cowley* in which Johnson produces his exhibits of metaphysical poetry reads at moments like the *Peri Bathous;* and in his plain statements, images, similes and allusions Johnson contrives to suggest that these poets resemble in some degree those lesser figures whose triviality Pope takes with such proper seriousness in *The Dunciad.* Both Johnson and Pope reprove a poetry whose ultimate referent is its author, a poetry impudent in the face of nature, a poetry whose energies expend themselves in barren, violent busyness, a poetry that is mere activity, not a deed.

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At bottom, then, Johnson's criticism of the metaphysical poets is a critique of ego, of the self impatient of restraint. He reminds us of what in sober moments we would probably not deny: that poets are men, that their qualities are but special cases of our own, and that poems, like other human utterances, are pieces of behaviour subject to moral judgement. In thus denying the poet one kind of specialness, Johnson forces upon him the weight of his humanity. He will not permit the poet to elect himself a god or to decline into a passive beneficiary or victim, a mechanism played upon by the seasons of the year, or an Apollo. Johnson invites him to be a man. For a good poet, in his dealings with his powers and his deficiencies, in his acceptance and exploitation of his nature, is exemplary man. He is original not only as a good poet but as a good man may be: he is unique; but he is not singular. And so with the poem.

Such a view of the poet and his poem consorts happily with the notion that the artist's business is imitation. I am not now speaking of imitation in the narrow sense of a Pope's or a Johnson's imitations of Horace or Juvenal[1] but of imitation that recognizes that Nature is prior to art. On this familiar notion I should like to dwell long enough to notice what seems to me its very attractive modesty—and at the same time its high ambition.

The poet as imitator is the very opposite of the assertive, busy, self-concerned and even impious figure whom Johnson condemns in his strictures on the metaphysicals. For Johnson, the true poet is not so presumptuous as to think of himself as a creator, a title

[1] For imitation in the narrow literary sense Johnson had small respect. He speaks condescendingly of the "facility" of Pope's imitations of Horace. Such works, he says, "will generally be uncouth and party-coloured; neither original nor translated, neither ancient nor modern." His own practice, to be sure, calls in question the general truth of his assertion. And, considering the subject more largely, there is a sense in which every poem is an exercise in literary imitation. If it were not, we would not know it was a poem. We would not know to what community of human works to assign it. (As Northrop Frye points out, the aim of the poetic process "is to produce a new member of a class of things called poems or novels or plays which is already in existence.") Certain of Johnson's utterances on matters of poetic technique—on the importance of rhyme, for instance, or the placement of the caesura—are referable to this notion. But in general he treats dismissively the stigmata of poetic tradition. To Dryden's objection to *Paradise Lost* that Adam cannot be its hero because he was overcome, Johnson replies that "there is no reason why the hero should not be unfortunate, *except established practice* . . ." Thus without argument, Johnson banishes from consideration a principle—"established practice"—that used to be supposed a central tenet of the aesthetic—Augustan, neo-classical, or what you will—that Johnson's criticism is often said to exemplify. In fact, of course, Johnosn is indeed impressed by the authority of established practice—but not simply because it is established. "Some seem to admire indiscriminately whatever has been long preserved," he says; but he is not of their number.

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properly reserved to God. But he is not therefore less original, less inventive. To conceive of art as imitation has seemed to some since Johnson's time culpably restrictive, a trivialization of the artist's function. But for Johnson, on the contrary, the loyalty to the real that imitation implies has the force of a positive, not a negative, commandment. For one thing, it is the more difficult course. "To select a singular event, and swell it to a giant's bulk by fabulous appendages of spectres and predictions, has little difficulty," he says contemptuously; "for he that forsakes the probable may always find the marvellous." The perplexities of the real do not yield themselves so readily to our understanding as to occasion our looking elsewhere for objects worthy of our attention. Imitation is the way of honor partly because of the opposition that the world, in its obdurate, elusive complication, offers to our attempts to come to grips with it. To imitate the real perfectly —even adequately—is occupation enough for any man.

Imitation, then, is active, demanding. To imitate nature is not merely to record phenomena: to number the streaks of the tulip is an undertaking that in its passivity resembles the meritless transcribings of inspiration. A poem is for Johnson an act of discernment; it is a matter of penetration. The poet as imitator fails not only when he "forsakes the probable" but when he is content to converse only with the surfaces of things, when he submits to the tyranny of the phenomenal. One great danger to which the artist as imitator is exposed is that in his proper fear of going too far he may not go far enough.

It is, in short, the artist's business to make sense of reality. How is this to be done? Consider for a moment an occasion when Johnson appears to invoke the doctrine of Poetic Justice.

> A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.

Notice Johnson's hesitancy. Here as elsewhere Johnson's attachment to the real, to "the common events of human life,"

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prevents him from embracing the theory that would make Milton's task, the assertion of Eternal Providence and the justification thereby of God's ways, the task of every dramatist. All things may indeed work together for good—somewhere, somehow; but it is not the playwright's business to tempt us to suppose that in this world they often do so. For mechanical dramatic imitations of the divine dispensation simplify the truth they would shadow forth; ordinary prose experience, daily contradicting the poet's providence, may therefore the more easily discredit God's. Poetry is not thus easily to be made more philosophical—or more theological—than history. But notice too Johnson's *yearning* that virtue triumph. As I say, Johnson's criterion here is not theory. It is pleasure.

Or rather, it is pain. The occasion of this passage is *King Lear*. "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death," Johnson continues, "that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play until I undertook to revise them as an editor." Here art has, for Johnson, gone too far in one direction by not going far enough in another. "I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene," Johnson interjects in his remarks on *Othello* V, ii. "It is not to be endured." Not enough has happened to the world in these imitations of it. But what is wrong is not a failure of art in the same sense as in, say, the instance of the blinding of Gloucester, where the mind is compelled "to relieve its distress by incredulity." No such relief, no such escape is permitted. In the scenes in question Shakespeare has, in Johnson's view, succeeded all too well in inducing us to suspend disbelief.

And such success is a kind of failure. "The delight of tragedy," Johnson observed in the "Preface to Shakespeare," "proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more." Here Johnson is as far as any modern historian of criticism could wish from confounding art and life. It is Shakespeare who, in Johnson's view, is guilty of that reprehensible confusion. "If the world be promiscuously described," says Johnson in *Rambler 4*, "I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirrour which shows all that presents itself without discrimination."

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The occasion of these remarks is the novel, not Shakespearian tragedy; and certain of the terms of discourse—safety, utility—are perhaps foreign to his discussion of the scenes from *Lear* and *Othello* (but perhaps not; unnecessary pain is always for Johnson useless and dangerous). And it is true that neither of these scenes is an instance of promiscuous (i.e., unselective) description. If anything, the Shakespearian scenes too mercilessly exclude the ordinary, which might provide the imagination some place of refuge. Still, granting all this, the sentence from *Rambler 4* is pertinent. The hand that holds up to Nature "a mirrour which shows all that presents itself without discrimination" exhibits to our view mere history. The artist has not done enough. And so, in some degree, with Shakespeare. The fate of Cordelia, Johnson is helpless to explain. No circumstance compelled Shakespeare to end the play as he did. It is something that Shakespeare "suffered"—that is, simply permitted—to occur. Cordelia's death is like a terrible accident, gratuitously painful to the beholder, empty of the consolations that tragedy can provide. Johnson here is indeed responding to a fiction as if it were life, blurring the presumably sacred distinction. But he is bewailing the necessity of doing so. His complaint about *Lear* is precisely that in this one respect it does not offer itself to consideration as a poem. It is terrible in a fashion impermissible in a work of art. In its fortuitousness, it is terrible as real life or death may be; that is to say, it is unintelligible.

Clearly Johnson is not worried about happy or unhappy endings as such. Few critics have insisted more strongly than he that (as Imlac observes) "Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed," and that it is part of the business of poetry to reflect and enforce that truth. But in the face of that truth the author has a certain duty. Just here the novelists of whom he complains in *Rambler 4* and the Shakespeare of the final scenes of *Lear* have failed. In their pages, reality simply happens.

The cheering simplicities of Poetic Justice attract Johnson; but also they make him uneasy. The doctrine is a kind of convenience, an idea at hand, and, though useful, it has about it the aridity of System and, like the Chain of Being, is not perfectly adequate to Johnson's experience of the realities it pretends to

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encompass. What, then, will suffice? Where shall we seek understanding?

Johnson never says, or never reduces his notions to rigid prescriptive formula. I think his answer is to be found in that body of particular utterances that express his views on what he calls "general nature." As everyone remembers, "general nature" is what the writer imitates; only "just representations" of it "please many, and please long." Only such works, that is to say, are permanent. And their permanence derives in part from their participation in the permanence of their objects, the permanence of "Nature and Passion, which are always the same." The whole drive of art, in this understanding of it, is away from accident, from the ephemeral, from a world constantly disorganizing itself like the change in one's pocket. It is, in short, by gaining access to "general nature" that poetry becomes more philosophical than history.

Quarrels with *Lear* notwithstanding, it is of course Shakespeare who is for Johnson the great poet of General Nature. But to us the term, in one of its applications, may seem more accurately associated with Johnson's own practice. For one of the tongues in which General Nature is most purely and memorably imitated is Johnsonian generality. It has not been my business in this essay to dwell on the manner of Johnson's art. What we call his works—his prefaces, his poems, his notes to Shakespeare, *Rasselas* and all the rest, even (or especially) that most elaborate fantasy of all, that true dream about language, the *Dictionary*—are magnificent fictions, elaborations of a voice, occasions of language. It sometimes seems that in his criticism the independent being of a poem of which he speaks—*Paradise Lost,* for instance, or Pomfret's *Choice*—is only a necessary but not a sufficient cause of our interest in Johnson's performance, a performance in which the poem, like an historical figure in a play of Shakespeare's, takes on a purely fictive existence as one of the *dramatis personae,* a figure in the dance. To such matters I should like to return at another time. My business at the moment is Johnsonian generality, and I believe that the man who denies the power of Johnsonian generality, like the critic who quarrels with Shakespeare's violations of the unities of time and place, "assumes, as an unquestionable principle, a position, which, while his breath is forming it into

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words, his understanding pronounces to be false." "To Generalize is to be an Idiot." Thus William Blake, in a roundly Johnsonian generalization. Blake's utterance both contradicts and exemplifies Johnson's pronouncement that "Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness." Perhaps the one assertion is as true as the other. And both give the same kind of pleasure: they seem to put us in the immediate possession of truth; they fill the mind with inspiriting conviction. This effect is not, of course, peculiar to Johnson and Blake. But such pleasure is certainly characteristically Johnsonian. And the particular sentences of Johnson's that live in memory are only the most intense, because the most concentrated, of the occasions on which we derive from him the delight that proceeds from great instruction. It would perhaps be difficult to demonstrate the continuities between the most apodictic of Johnson's utterances and his more discursive elucidations of "great thoughts" and "positions not limited by exceptions." But the connections exist. In Johnson at his best, what we everywhere enjoy is the sensation of wisdom.

Johnson himself speaks of that sensation, though of course he does not call it by that name. He associates it with originality. Certain stanzas of Gray's *Elegy,* he says, "are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them." The sensation of wisdom, that is to say, is the effect that originality produces in a reader. About *this* kind of originality—about wisdom—there is a wonderful modest openness. And that openness, that candor, is a species of generosity. In more than one sense of the word it is a gift. It is a gift that Johnson possesses and imparts.

I said at the outset that in this essay I wished to suggest that one usual objection to Johnson's criticism—that it treats art as life—points not at a defect but at a virtue of his practice. But as we have seen there is a sense in which the indictment is simply false. One purpose of art is to make the pain and difficulty of the real available to understanding; and to this end some consciousness of illusion, some awareness of imitation as *merely* imitation, is necessary. We must not be Fielding's Partridge-at-the-play. We must not be so ridiculous; and we must not be made to suffer so much.

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In his considerations of art as artifact, then, Johnson can draw the line between books and life clearly enough. But, as I have said perhaps too often, writing is for Johnson *something that men do;* and therefore moral judgements about it are proper. To think of the work of art as the artist's work, his action, is to open it to comparison with other kinds of human achievement. To conceive of the making of the poem as potentially an historic event, like a battle or the discovery of the laws of motion, is to give an answer to those who in the age of Newton and after might speak, as Newton spoke, of poetry as "a kind of ingenious nonsense."

Similarly, to regard the artist as possibly a dangerous man is to take him very seriously indeed. We fear only what is powerful. To the powers of art, for good and ill, Johnson was highly sensitive. Here, as I close, I should like to open an important question. For Johnson a poem is act and artifact; it is also its consequences. This *something that a man does,* this *something that a man has done* is also something that has been done to men.

Just here we come, I think, to the question of the present usefulness of Johnson's way of speaking about books. And now for a moment I must speak personally, though with the hope that what is said has some point of contact with the experience of others. It seems to me obvious that some books—even, or especially, some very good books—have the power to harm people, or harm some people or harm them at certain turns in their lives. Any book can of course be misused. But to one class of writings chiefly belongs this power darkly and excessively to disturb. I mean the literature of extreme situations—the literature of imprisonment, betrayal, torture, perversion, madness and death. I mean in short the literature of pain, for which the last century or so has been remarkable. Such books can poison the imagination. Let me say at once—let me insist—that I know that this sort of response tells me nothing of the merit of the work. The merest piece of trash can have the effect of which I speak as surely as a Russian novel. And such a response certainly does not tell me that the book arousing it should be censored or banned. But I do not believe that it tells me nothing at all. It proves upon my pulses that in books there may be energies indescribable in the language of a criticism merely literary. I mean simply that

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my extreme and idiosyncratic response dramatizes for me that the reading of a book may be a real event in the sense that it can affect life. The accidentally malign influence of certain books upon me is an exaggerated and aberrant instance of the kind of effect that, for good as well as ill, is proper to many books of any serious interest at all.

The language of criticism does in fact make formal recognition of the kind of power of which I have been speaking. The very word "power" is a favorite among critics of every level of seriousness; and it seems always to mean the power to disturb (as if disturbance were in itself a good). But how imperturbable they are in the face of these assaults upon their serenity! The insufficiency of such a criticism, it seems to me, is that it fails to communicate any sense of risk. Which is to say that it denies the reality of the power it intends to celebrate. It treats the power it praises as if it would at last go away, as if its only consequence were a kind of thrill.

In speaking of the sense of risk that I believe our discourse about books ought sometimes to convey, I do not mean that critics should make a show of their shattered nerves. "Sir, I should never hear it if it made me such a fool," said Johnson once in scorn of Boswell's extravagant responses to music. But surely I am right in supposing that Johnson would be hostile to the literature of pain. To him it would seem that its authors had transformed what Johnson perceived as the defects of the final scenes of *Lear* into a positive principle. Art is life—but it is *chosen* life. Pain may sometimes be for Johnson an object of choice. Dying, he refused opiates that he might "render up [his] soul to God unclouded." But we should not seek suffering in books, where our pain may be at once intense and trivial. Quite the contrary: "The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it."

Perhaps in believing this he was wrong, though I do not think so. Never mind. The point is that, in Johnson's sense of it, literature may be *transitive*. Books are acts, and we are their objects. I believe that, for us as for him, what happens to us when we read them is a matter of legitimate moral concern, a concern proper to literary criticism.

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I make something of the harm books can do partly because I wish to make something of their power for good. To some this may seem an unreal question. We know—or think we know—that the study of humane subjects is in no practical way improving; the death camp commander who passed his evenings listening to Brahms and reading Goethe is commonly offered in evidence. Perhaps that evidence tells the truth. Perhaps books make no one good. But I do not speak of virtue. His cultural pursuits did not indeed make the camp commander a better man. They simply made him a guiltier one.

And perhaps it is thus that our studies, too, though they make us no better, do us good. They hold us responsible. "For by the law is the knowledge of sin," says St. Paul. "Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law." Perhaps our studies, like the law, help to make us guilty, which is to say that they help us to know, not *who* we are (that queer modern question), but *what* we are. And they show us something else. For without the law, as without the Tree of Knowledge, there is no innocence either.

Or, perhaps better, without it there is no definition of what at last is *not* expected of us. Of the two, our guilt and our guiltlessness, the latter is perhaps the more painful to contemplate. In certain respects guilt is the most comfortable because it is the most prideful of the moral sentiments. For guilt, or an excessive sense of it, expresses our impulse toward omnipotence, our false notion that our natures are entirely within our own power. To the extent that a man holds himself guilty he asserts that things might have been otherwise. And so, in great degree, they might have been. But not entirely. In that fact we are free to take some sombre comfort.

In art as in morals, says Johnson, the dim frontier between will and limitation is difficult and important to chart. Of the perplexing physics of the interplay between how much is demanded of a man and how much is forgiven him, books do not, for Johnson or for us, provide Newtonian descriptions. For reader and writer, they are only one of the fields where those forces converge. But they are also at least that. Of the rewards and dangers of venturing into such fields of force, the life of Johnson, the life of the poet as he described and lived it, is noble example.

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HAYDEN CARRUTH

Fallacies of Silence

NOT MUCH LITERARY CRITICISM THESE DAYS is granted the *éclat* that came almost as a matter of course to certain brilliant and valuable works a generation ago. Probably not much deserves it. Yet one recent essay is being celebrated in ways that remind us of the earlier time. Its title is "Silence and the Poet," its author is George Steiner, and a few days ago I read it.[1] It is worth attending to.

Steiner's main concerns in his published criticism have sprung from his perception of the terrifying interrelationships among literature, language, and contemporary history, particularly as experienced in Europe during the years that ended with Hitler's downfall. How, Steiner asks repeatedly, could the wardens of the infamous camps have been devoted, as we know some were, to the great expressions of German humanism? How could the *gauleiter* who spent his evenings closeted with the eloquence of Goethe, Heine, or Fontane, use that same language the next day for composing warrants to send children and their parents into torture and death? What becomes of the poet in such a world? What becomes of his responsibilities, to his art and to his humanity? What happens to language itself when it is so misused? What remains of the essential value of the word, or of our faith in the meaning of meaning?

These are disturbing questions. All who lived through those years, even in America, have asked them, and have submitted, reluctantly or readily, to the reversions of shame, guilt, and despair entailed in them. But without doubt Steiner, whose personal and family history connect him intimately with the European disaster, has asked them with more purpose than most, and with greater urgency, so that his responses are sharpened and remarkably well articulated. This is evident in his writings which evoke the German social and cultural milieu in and after the Hitlerian episode, or in essays dealing with the works of particular authors who lived and wrote during that time. But the essay in question is not of this

[1] Reprinted in Steiner's *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York, 1967), pp. 36-54.

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sort; it is more general, conjectural, and polemical, an argument in applied esthetics; written, if one may judge from its tone, in a white heat of concern. Like many such works it is confused and overwritten, replete on the one hand with a sense of humane commitment that produces on the other an imperious rhetoric, as if to clear the way for deeply felt but questionable propositions. As a sign of its author's feeling the essay is forgivable, perhaps commendable, but as a passage in literary theory it needs more study.[2]

The essay is in two parts, undifferentiated and poorly joined. In the first part Steiner attempts to show how poetry, taken as the generalized verbal motion of the human imagination, contains within itself three tendencies of transcendence: toward light, toward music, and toward silence. But we see at once how confusion enters. The three are not consonant. As his example of transcendence toward light, Steiner chooses the passage which would occur to all of us, the ending of the *Paradiso,* one of the few moments of genuine transcendence in our literature. But Dante makes it perfectly clear that this is precisely what it is, transcendence, elevation from one level of perception to another, not mere transference between two modes of sensuous perception: not, in other words, the transformation of word into landscape, sound into sight or touch, verbalism into plasticity, but a movement from "outer" to "inner" light, away from sensuousness altogether, into the meta-physical. Dante says his eyesight must be purged or made pure (*sincera*) before he can "see" the lofty light that in itself is true (*alta luce che da sé é vera*), which I take to mean that his eyesight is refined of materiality and removed, as such, from his actual eyes. Dante says:

> *Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,*
> *mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,*
> *e sempre di mirar facîesi accesa.*

It is his mind which, "all rapt, was gazing, fixed, still and intent,

[2] Should we applaud or lament the fact, observed over the years, that criticism wastes much of its effort as it moves from generation to generation? Because it is secondary and derivative and hence must always revert to its primary source in the poem, there is a failure of direct transmission from one critic to another. Many of Steiner's perplexities with language might be relieved if he applied the notions worked out forty years ago by Kenneth Burke. But I see no sign that he is aware of them.

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and ever enkindled with gazing"—his *mind,* not his eyes; his mind in all the cognitive immediacy and autonomy that medieval psychology gave to it; his mind fixed and immobile, that is, beyond sense and without will. And if his speech fails when his mind is struck by the divine flash of light (*la mia mente fu percossa da un fulgore*), the failure does not persist into the time of actual composition, for the language, the singing but simple tension of the last canto (song), is the verbal triumph of the poem.

Transcendence, literal, actual, absolute, is what that canto is about, as all readers recognize, and what the whole *Paradiso* has been leading up to. But with Steiner's second category, the movement toward music, we enter a different dimension and find ourselves in an incongruity. Here we have not transcendence but transference. By pointing to various examples Steiner shows how western poets have striven in their language toward pure sound, as if music were a superior kind of expression, as indeed many poets have claimed, including poets of every age and school; in short, the Orphic theme, a dominant in western tradition from ancient times to the present. The evidence is abundant and well-known. We agree with Steiner's account of it. But two further considerations occur to us, which Steiner does not mention. First, the movement toward music is not a movement from sensuousness to metaphysicality; properly speaking, therefore, it is not transcendence at all, but mere transference from one mode of sensuous perception to another, from verbalism to tonality. It concerns two ways of perceiving, but both on the same level, involving two of our five physical senses, sight and hearing. Second, the Orphic tradition, so closely attached to the idea of music, is nevertheless a worded tradition, a literary tradition, the property of poets, not of musicians. There is, I believe, an equal but contrary or complementary tradition in music, although few musicians, naturally enough, have written about it. I mean the striving toward language, especially in the development of instrumental music from post-Renaissance times to our own. What is the syntax of Bach, the rhyming of Mozart, the rhetoric of Beethoven and Bruckner, and the whole expressionist tendency from Brahms to Debussy and Mahler to early Stravinsky, if it is not a striving toward utterance, toward statement, toward idea; an attempt to combine sounds in such a way that they will create an ultra-sonic meaning based on a

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projection of sublimated rationalism? Thus each mode strives toward the other in an effort to surpass itself. But however far poetry and music move horizontally toward each other—and certainly we have seen their limits extended in recent decades—this does not entail a movement vertically out of their common sensuousness. Neither can move beyond its own being-in-this-world. For if the medium is not the message—and I certainly hope it is not—it is indubitably the substance, the substantiality, and even Dante had to resort to language that does not break down in order to tell us of the time when language did break down.

In his third category, the movement toward silence, which is his most important for the purposes of the essay in question, Steiner cites two examples, Hölderlin's decline from poetry into madness and Rimbaud's escape from poetry into the life of action. True enough, these are species of silence. But leaving aside the probabilities that Hölderlin's silence was not the silence of silence but the silence of bedlam (a distinction to which some of us can attest), and that Rimbaud's flight was motivated merely and negatively by the same intellectual disgust with poetry which at moments overtakes most of us; leaving aside, that is, the fact that these two remarkable poets can be interpreted only in terms of themselves, we must still deal with the *mystique* of silence which has without doubt drawn heavily upon their examples and which has become increasingly prominent in western literature of the past century. Steiner affirms that this is what he means: the myth, the cult. He indicates the role that silence has played in the thought and feeling of poets as diverse as Shelley and Valéry. But there are kinds of silence. In Steiner's essay they are not distinguished. The silence of wonder, for instance, is not the silence of defeat. And both are very different from the silence we actually discover in poetry, which is not true silence at all. It is silence as an incorporate element in the medium or the technique, silence as a verbal ploy. Thus we see poets relying on the elocutionary pause, suggested typographically, as intrinsic to modern prosody, in ways analogous to the use of silence by composers like John Cage or of empty space in the grouped figures of Henry Moore or the "cage" sculptures of Herbert Ferber. Silence has become a mere extension of style—useful, informing, expressive.

In other words it seems to me that the first part of Steiner's essay

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is a confusion not only between transcendence and transference or two different kinds of experience, it is a confusion between experience and reflection, between poetic ends and means. All of us, whether we are religious or not, agree that moments of immediate, ultra-sensuous experience do occur. We may refer to them pseudo-rationalistically, using such terms as *insight* and *intuition,* or we may identify them subjectively and metaphorically: the divine light, the music of the spheres, the stillness at the heart of eternity —light, music, silence. In all these cases, however, we mean a real transcendence, a movement out of ourselves, an ecstatic experience in which we abandon our ordinary sensory locus. In the case of silence particularly, we mean real silence, a breakdown and cessation of language—language being the paradigm of our intelligent presence in the material world. We mean the silence which signifies direct perception with no interposing sense-mechanics: the mystic's confrontation with God, the naturalist's moment of dissolution in universal force. At the other end of the scale, we know that a poet faced with the degradation of language, its drift toward meaninglessness in the lying utterances of politics and commerce or in the simple erosive monotone of mass culture, may suffer, in his dismay, a breakdown or dislocation of his own language and a consequent paralysis of imagination, resulting in silence—again real silence, the silence of defeat, of nihilism. These are the extremes, absolute silences, beyond sensuousness, God-bestowed and devil-inspired; they are the bounds of poetry. Indeed poetry is bounded on all sides by silence, is almost defined by silence. And doubtless it does strive toward its bounds in its search for ends, viz. for newly perceived and reordered experience. The poet seeks *his* new experience in *his* new words, careless of the fact that neither experience nor words can be new. Steiner regards this as a case of the artist's risk-taking. It is a Promethean raid on the inarticulate, which by ellipsis becomes a raid on the power of the Word, the all-meaning divine silence. It is a crime which the poet commits in the hope of bringing back new vigor to human speech, but for which he may pay instead the penalty of being struck dumb. This is a highly mythic view, romantic and charged with fatalism. Fortunately, we have good reason to think that in its search for means, as opposed to ends, poetry is more reasonable and returns to its own center, the region of greatest articulation.

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Sensuousness, the substance *ex natura rei* of imagination, cannot surpass itself; to name silence is to break it; and Dante, who babbled at the sight of God, spoke good vulgar Italian afterward when he wrote his poem. Moreover he was careful to discriminate, with beautiful Dantean lucidity, the two occasions into two modes of experience, the mystical and the material, each with its own needs.

From this Steiner proceeds in the second part of his essay to a consideration of the writer's predicament in contemporary history, especially in totalitarian societies. He describes eloquently the degradation of language in our time. It is something that all responsible writers live with and know: the way whole swaths of our vocabulary are stricken from us by the subversions of the press, the advertising industry, and politics. We live among masses of rotting wordage like rats on the town dump. We must steal our scraps of meaning from the useless mounds of decay, while the area in which we can move freely grows ever smaller. The true language, living language, contracts before our eyes. Confronted with this, Steiner recommends that we write less, saving our few remaining words, so to speak, for the occasions of greatest personal and human value; and in the extremest situation, where language has been completely debased by the lies and atrocities of totalitarianism—for it is clear that no barbarity can be committed that has not first been conceived and ordered in human speech—he says we should not write at all. Silence is best. But I hope I have shown how this projection of his mythic fatalism into the present social predicament of the writer does not follow from his earlier argument. I hope I have shown how his confusion between ends and means, between transcendence and transference, between the metaphysical and sensuous modes, and especially between silence as a product of wonder or defeat and silence as an extension of style, leads to a practical absurdity. About real silence we can say nothing, literally. It has no words. How can it be a social or political mechanism? Stylistic silence, on the other hand, has its uses; but they must be examined in utilitarian terms. We know that one poet who relies on pauses and rests as part of his technique reduces himself to stuttering fatuity, while another succeeds in reinforcing his basic poetic structures. We know that when we are faced by the official interrogator it is both courageous and reason-

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able to shut up. But silence as a principle, an invariable means, a kind of standing on our dignity, a withholding of ourselves from the world to signify our denial of the world's subverters and perverters? No, I can't accept that. Steiner himself has nothing but praise for the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto who continued writing, lucidly and with conscious artistic and human integrity, throughout the prolonged agony of their own destruction.[3]

In short, within his three tendencies to "transcendence," which he treats as if they were of one kind, Steiner has confused two modes of human experience, the corporeal and the spiritual (to use antiquated terms); and from his confusion he has attempted to infer rules of practice for poets in their craft. It can't be done. He ends by assigning to one kind of silence, poetic silence, values derived from the other kind of silence, ecstatic silence. It is a contradiction, almost as if he asked the poet to be wordless in words. And such a muddle is dangerous, I believe, not only because it destroys our concept of the poetic function and misconstrues the poet's role in society, but because it introduces false distinctions into our view of the relationship between art and reality, between the poem and its object, or between the poetic mind and the human body.

Where does this imputed contraposition of the human and the artistic come from? It is insidious. I have said elsewhere that it is a product of post-Nietzschean disillusionment, especially as it was worked out in the literature of style during the first half of our century; it was an attempt to supplant the chaos of devalued existence with the order of style, the reality of fiction. But whether or not that historical conjecture is right, let me repeat, with *all* the great theorists: art and life, art and reality, art and the world are the *same thing*. The integrity of one is the integrity of the other. The word and the act sink or swim together.

We are not the only writers who have served in a time of verbal degeneracy. Indeed it seems to have been the case almost always, poets deploring the sad state of their language. Were the Elizabethans, to choose a difficult example, verbally motivated only by enthusiasm for their new vocabulary, imported from overseas? Or were they equally concerned to amend the outworn Skeltonic language they had inherited? We can't tell, though I suspect the lat-

[3] *Op. cit.*, pp. 155–68.

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ter. But certainly by the time of the Augustans decay of language through popular or official misuse had become a serious affair. Swift and Pope spent half their lives decrying the scribblers, the jobbers, and the time-serving pamphleteers; and the *Dunciad* ends with a terrifying vision of the world reduced to chaos through verbal dullness, one of the great infernos of modern literature. And so it continued through the romantics and post-romantics to our own time. For sixty years Pound insisted on the corrective function of poetry, both in language and in society—in basic morality.

But has anyone before this ever recommended silence? Seriously, as a major poetic means? We live encompassed by a verbal civilization whose structures become visibly useless from day to day, worn out, broken, befouled. Our public persons, whether disk jockeys or evangelists, salesmen or senators, are driven to ever more frantic outbursts in their efforts to revive the meaning of language that they themselves have decimated. Worse—at least in some respects—our poetry itself weakens as its growth becomes more massive, forms overburdened with stereotypes, styles machine-made and plastic; or so it seems to me. But still, does anyone recommend silence? That would be an apocalyptic view. Yet apocalypse itself is a poetic event, a revelation caught and held in words.

Poetry moves toward its own center, where the fount of language flows most freely. That is its going ahead, its renewal. It returns from the frontiers of experience bearing chaos and revolution, the rawness of events, which it submits to the regulative conceptualizings of our permanent, concrete, basic, human modes; that is, to language. How do you correct the misuse of a word? By using it rightly. How do you combat the schoolteacher who in common ignorance subjects your child to a confounding of *mundane* and *menial*? You distinguish meanings: with the child at least, with the schoolteacher if possible. We need not less but more good writing. This is *not* a defense of the establishment, not of *any* establishment. Traditions come and go. My point is that they come and go *in language*. I am making a plea for courage among writers, and for a recognition that the means of poetry are what they are and what they have always been.

As for those who live oppressed in states of total, totalitarian in-

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humanity—and we Americans are aware that I may turn out to have been indicating ourselves—I say that all who are artists or who acknowledge art depend on them as on no others. Let silence be their tactic, never their strategy. The least sentence spirited from prison or ghetto or death camp is our treasure; the test of humanity in its extreme moment is its choice of words. Not cries, not groans, though these may have eloquence too when we know the context; but chosen words. Think of George Jackson choosing his; not always rightly, yet in his anguish so often exact and just and true—so very, very often. Indeed I think no man is a writer who does not know himself in prison. And if the torturer has a taste for Schiller, or the mace-sprayer by chance has at one time responded to Melville, this does not change Schiller and Melville. Words fixed in rightness cannot be altered by repetition. Only the use of words for new evil, original evil, debases them.

Then write. Write well. Honestly, meaningly, imaginatively, and from the center. The *stylistes* are elsewhere, studying silence. They are no help to us.

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A. R. AMMONS

Pray without Ceasing

I hear the low falling from the
highlands of hog-pasture, a music
of spheres, a couple: whatever is

done is to be
undone:
call me down from the
high places: I have achieved much
of the difficulty of my translation:

stock in trade
gunstock
stockings
stocks & bonds & good
stock
put no stock in that
a stock case
in stock
stock the soup

3, the mystical figure, comes through:
the alternating, suspended,
opposing spheres undirected and
the directed unity, reconciler and
putter to sleep—
milt on
the levees of rationality:

"O Aegypte,
Aegypte, of thy religious rites nought
will survive but tales
which thy children's children
will not believe;

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nought
will survive but words graven upon
stones that tell of thy piety."
(Trismegistus)

and in sleep, as in a natural sleep,
prone, face turned as if into breath,
he had about him needments, bottles of
rare glass, bowls: we wrapped him
in reed mat, rose from decomposing,
generating waters, went up on
the plateau
and put him in
sand: hereafter has
not changed since for him:
but his head's
magnificence and funny-stuff, those
epicycles of motion, rituals of
turning, dancing, the wind
has taken, nothing
changed into grass: all the way
out of the rise and fall:

O Egypt I sometimes hear the
future of the universe
speaking in a moonwheel's
turning of sand and light:

we set out a withe of silver grass and
it remains: it
has interfered with the natural wind,
fractured the paralleleity of
moonbeams and disturbed
lesser sandstorms: mimicry
so often far more succeeds:

you heal back from napalm: the
flame-scars pull chin to chest,
the fingers stick: the mercy

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of sand's
scarless:

when the sand roars, a lion
rouses in the center, his eyes,
as if in a hollow, headless:
recognition is
the fiercest imperative:

a pararox, couple achers: the
real estate of the imagination:

whatever is—
terror, pity, grief, death,
rising—a child sits in explosion's
clutter, homeless, his small
driftwood legs, his eyes inventing
an equal rage & dark, white smears
of burn
the mask
his face must fit:
whatever is, brutality, the inner siege,
the mind orange, blue with
desolation's mold, something
thin & high
cuts through whatever is
and makes no difference of difference:

my mouth, become eyes, weeps
words: words spill
into
hyacinths: for my acquaintance
with grief is
intimate, lost voices my credentials:
singing's been sung: the same
body is crying:

fatigues snagged by wire,
bodies sag in their buttons, collars

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flutter, surf jogs, the wind
all outside and usual:
blue dusk fills up under the gold smoke:
the sky violates nothing to intercede:

I held her
by the rose and
intruded: the petals
slickened, silken: I shaved
my head &
offered it there:
O rose
the microflora along your hinder walls
are fast bloomers: tunnel-scapes
beady with stiff
moss: who keeps the saltsea keeps
its plankton, not reasonable?
microflora, reproducing, don't mind
the long glider that
coming shoulders out the wind to
fundamental suction: collapsible
I live with
spherical walls:
everyway I look leaning in, leaning in's
the style &
passing over: I pick pockets of
perse pansies, poesies, posepays,
powder palls & wary:

I had a little pony:
his name was Dapple Gray:
and every time I had him,
he tried to get away:

who will eat from such a garden
let him have an oedipal situation
and my rights and privileges:

that the triadic Hegel could have been

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evidencing his
genitals is a notion of
such cracking solemnity
birds fail to fly:

some are spring harvests: today,
April Fools', a squirrel in the leafless
elm gathered torn bark and inner tissue
from dead branches, wadding them
into her mouth then going limb by
thinning limb to leap onto the heavy
electric wire, then going upstreet to my
neighbor's streetside spruce: I
think that's
where the nest will be:
waste assimilated into
use: the result a neatness
unpremeditated, a re-ingestion of
process:
so arranged it is that my wasted
life becomes words
that through complexity and
unstructured swirl
seek the fall-out of
comparable enhancements:

occurrences
  recognitions
    surroundings

                tensions sprung free
                into events

happenstance & necessity
  prediction & surprise
    moment & forever

and the gloomy, oh the melancholy,
remorseful

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falling back and away
of time-sunk persons and places,
ragged knots
of a grounded, celestial kite:

yesterday robins
on the dark edge of dusk sang like
peepers:
I went out to listen
and they were robins:

and on the cold edge of spring
though on a warm day
we went out into the woods for
hepaticas up
along Six Mile Creek: we
found one spring-beauty and
by sun-warmed logs
a few clusters of hepatica,
hundreds of plants
but few bloomers: the
backfall of creekwater was
interesting, countercaps, and
compensating, the up-creek water
along eddying banks:

peripheries:
the dance about the fire,
utterance of tongues,
parlance of feet:
griefs can't be removed,
only altered, caught up into the
timed motions
of bearable sway:

fall in love with yourself
where it's shallow:
don't
thwart shriveling up by

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suddenly drowning:

if change is certain, as say so many,
certainty is where there isn't any:

pop gun
soda pop
pop art
popsicle
mom & pop
popinjay
pop in
popeyed
population

I can't get that star carted I said:
flooded carburetor, cracked voltage
regulator: I didn't realize at once
it was apt: a Starchief: and
one day a man said looking at
the dash word, it has
your name in it: St*archief*: he
was a good abstractor:

I had a little pony:
his name was Dapple Gray:
and when I tried to trim him,
he had a lot to bray:

an inch of snow last night but
mid morning is bright and melting:
the shadows are white:

napalm isn't falling here:
so what is it:

first, an explosion near the ground:
then a tarry rain,
soft and afire, falls, crumbles, & sticks:

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sticks to trees, houses, children,
things like that: if
it hits it's 94.3% effective:

I see my death, my horror, the radical,
real, senseless pain,
as a coming afloat,
rocking in a mastery of oceans:
what time caricatures should
time keep:
to those busy making themselves
great, with grave music and
solemn looks, a thorough using up and
setting forth of language's materials,
I send
empty statements, slip-shoddiness,
incredible breeziness and such:
the wind we go to
understands everything:
I sing, though, in a way, the best I can,
for I may be understood
where I do not understand:

around the aureola matters get touchy:

confusion erodes the ice-glass
steel offices buildings of rationality:
anti-rationality only makes another
kind of trust: complexity
blurs the sleek towers, wilts the
phallus of mistaken direction:

welcome to your unattended,
coin-operated, do-it-yourself
laundry:
bring and use your favorite bleach,
soap, and starch: if
machine is
defective, please use another machine:

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to start washer put money in coin meter
and
(1) if slide type meter—slowly push
slide all the way in: then slowly
pull slide all the way out:
(2) if rotary knob type meter—
turn knob:
tub
will start filling not later than ½
minute after operating coin slide:

stopcock
cock & bull
ears cocked
cocktail
peacock
cockle
cockney
cockiness
cockscomb
poppycock
cockeyed
cockroach
cockpit
cocksure

dryclean wash 'n wears, even cotton
items: use this
handy clothing guide: follow
these simple steps:
brush away loose lint
and other soiling matter: turn sweaters
inside out: turn down cuffs of
trousers: insert the
necessary coins:

rubbers, after several drycleanings,
tend to lose elasticity: plastic-coated
fabrics often become stiff:

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beware sequins, beads, and other fragile
ornaments, can get you into trouble:

remove wear wrinkles and sharpen creases
and pleats: some spots refuse
to come out, rust, mildew, dried paint,
indelible ink:

little artery, couple inches long,
branching into cardiac muscle: it pops
and you give up philosophy and
ultimate concern, car payments, son and wife,
you give up the majors & minors,
the way you like your egg cooked, your
class ring, lawn,
sparrows nesting in the garage, the
four crocus bulbs (maybe more next
year), toenails and fillings:

I wouldn't want to happen up on any
critters of eternity, absolutes that
end the world: fellow said one star
up there in our galaxy is mostly
gadolinium, a rare earth;
nobody knows how the concentration occurred:
then there are other surpluses and
scarcities
that uneven the tissue:
I wouldn't want anything
to get known tight: ignorance is our
boat giving us motion: or, capsized,
knowledge is our ark which is more in
line with the tradition:
    the ocean would then
    be what it
    is:

spirit, though
it encompasseth mightiness, etc., however,

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cannot, like a motor,
raise and lower
toast:

nothing matters, believe me, except
everything: to sift & sort, magnify
& diminish, admit & renounce, impairs
the event:
what the mind can't accept's obscene:
the rest shines with an
additional, redeeming
light,
the light in the head
of language in motion:

the wave coming in, running, gathers,
lofts, curls—the instant of
motion's maximum
organization: then: then one is
forty & hollow: the curl's reach
redeems the hollow, equals it, till
the curl touches over: what is the
use: the crashing, the hollow coming
topside into wide prevalence,
the flat waters skinnying out and
rushing back—is merely endurance
until the next wave lifts:
as for what's left,
dip it and ship it: to have made
it here is not to have it made:

entering is lovely:
such delicacies, scents, the
feminine source, perfumes: cookies
in the oven, delights:

mixmaster, mixmister,
mast me a mix, ur,
mix me a mist, ur . . .

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the mixers and blenders chew up
differences: chomp & whirl
to knotless paste: the spurt for
equilibrium:
to compensate for which somewhere root,
bark, leaf must make a walnut, some
skinny saint rail through the cosmos,
shot from earth by penury and dread:
what is more costly or
needed than a mind shot to space by
shiny thrust, a renunciation of
earth, a negative blast away:

I have seen all the way in with
a white bang that they
are spheres, round solids, sprinkled,
lightly, in a medium, not
empty, called space and that
these round bodies go round
different orders of center
that swoosh away burning
their peripheries and sucking
their centers through virgin space, neither
up nor
down—the
terror that that is
the way it is,
that particular way, a
pure flower of terror:

ancient souls sitting on
the bright banks of forever
in
raptures of old acquaintance: for every
never again,
an always again: and young souls
from their quick missing
quick as branches and glittering:
where the lost remains, immortal in

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the foreverness of the lost:
say good morning, say buon giorno,
say hi
to infant brother, to mother, father,
sit down under the golden pines on
the slopes of no further parting:

the Buddhist nun burns for the peace
her ashes will achieve:

the village woman coming home finds
her shack afire, her
son & husband shot: she bends down
where she is:
she is given tokens of the dead but
her left arm like a sickle reaps at the
air
for the harvest
already taken:

through the reeds somewhere, as by a
paddy or ditch in her head,
wind burrs
a leaf: the woman flutters,
her grief absolute and
not a mystery:

how can I know I
am not
trying to know my way into feeling
as

feeling
tries to feel its way into knowing:
it's
indifferent what I say: the motions
by which
I move
manifest

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merely a deeper congruence
where the structures are:

run my poem through your life and
exist, decommissioned,
like rubble,
innocent, slouchy on the uptake:

the scramblers, grabbers, builders—
rubblerousers: sticking stone to
false stone in a unity of walls which
wants to come apart: let
weeds and grasses move in among a
scattering, make a little shade, hide
mice, give burrows to ground bees,
byway hideouts to the engines of spiders,
stones the
owl can come and sit in moonlight on:
we
should all be in a shambles, shacked up,
peeping round the grasshoppers,
preserving a respectful quiet:

don't snatch & grab: grab snatch:
laboratory tests attest,
when a system of two bodies
charges and discharges itself
it's peaceful as tulips:

can a 41-year-old man living on dandelion leaves
from the cool edges of junkyards
find
songlore enough
in the holocausts, boggy garbage,
fly swarms, lamb bones, and rust-floral
cans
of his weedy search
to sustain interest:

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the continuum, one
and visionless, within
which
the breakdown of pure forms,
arising of skyscrapers, laws,
the high crystal-clear arising
of theory:

the evening blue-purple, the trees
black,
the birds can't quit singing: damp
heat built
and rose through the golden towered afternoon,

broke finally into motion, as of
descent, rain beating
straight down
between racks of thunder:

can anything be erased: can this day's
praising hold to the day it praises
down the slopes of total entropy:

pray without ceasing:

we found hailstones in the grass
and ate them to cool:
spurred stones
with interior milkwhite halos,
an arrested spangling:
the high hard water
melted
aching out tongues.

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RICHMOND LATTIMORE

Spanish Succession

With acknowledgments to Southey

By Blenheim's battleground, old Caspar's grandchildren questioned him
about that famous victory which had left the plowlands
sown with skulls. Why did they fight? Who made them so angry?

Old Caspar, not one of the movers and shakers, had no real answer.
It was a question, who's going to sit on the throne of Spain,
that gathered the eagles, Eugene, Marlborough, old pros confronting

Villars and Boufflers, nearly their match, to ruffle the drummed armies,
to burst on the bewildered peasantry in Bavaria, the Low Countries
(who never knew what hit them, or why, because of that hypothetical

Spanish Successor) the reeking names of glory embattled at Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet, the grand heritage
of bloodstained banners worshipped in almost timeless regiments;

until the Allies against Louis all of a sudden realized the man
it now turned out they had been about to install on the Spanish
throne was quite unsuitable, and that was the Treaty of Utrecht;

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and in the villages of Flanders which had been the strategic
squares for these bloody chess-combinations, the still-wondering yokels
were spared further gallantry and glory for almost a whole generation.

Daisy Fields, Enchanted Forests

What's in our past
that we can call our own?
Some of our leaves are lost,
some fields are overgrown.

The meadows dipped and rolled
away to the hill side,
our daisy fields of old,
and one elm in her pride.

There was a track below
the quarry with its rail.
There is no quarry now.
There is no trail.

Strangest of all,
has grown a suburb, split-
levels where hills were tall
with trees. It

invades the daisy meadow,
and where the elm stood
tall with its proud shadow
has grown the peopled wood

where we'll no more. All lost,
the meadow where we strolled,
the fields we crossed.
And can I be so old?

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Of Truth and Fact

Robins in dogwood toss
and tumble, flirt, alight
to mere touch of twigs, flutter, cross
their own invisible line of flight;

entity in air, valid
fact of immaterial motion, made
of speed and impulse, projected, rallied
back to base, lost, displayed

as agitation, torn air
without meaning, eternally
vanishing into nowhere.
As true as tree.

Protoprimavera

Spring with her messy poems makes
crocus shine in mud,
reluctant roots, reticent vines stir,
branches bud;

in cold upland corners iced
slabs strain into mist, seem
a seeming realized
in an impersonal dream.

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Noon

From the French of Leconte de Lisle

Noon, summer king, descending from the skyblue height
in silver shimmers spreads across the entire plain,
and all is quiet. The air burns, breathless and bright,
and the land clothed in fire dreams under his domain.

The scope is huge. There is no shadow anywhere.
The spring is dried where once the cattle could drink deep,
and, dark about the edge, the forest over there
rests in its immobility of heavy sleep.

Only the great ripe heads of grain, a golden sea,
untouched by sleep, roll into distance and away.
Pacific children of blest earth's fertility,
these freely drink the sunshine from the bowl of day.

And sometimes from this murmuring and heavy grain,
as if the ardent soul within had sighed aloud,
a slow majestic ripple goes across the plain
to die on the horizon's dusty haze of cloud.

Nearby, lazily dribbling on dewlaps, a few
cream-colored oxen lie at rest along the grass,
and with their great eyes, languid and superb, pursue
the inward dream that they will never bring to pass.

Oh, you who with heart full of joy or bitterness
may chance to pass at noon across this radiant plain,
depart! Here the sun burns, nature is emptiness.
Here nothing lives. Nothing feels pleasure here, nor pain.

But if, beyond all laughter and all tears, you live
free from that troubled world whence you have taken flight,
with nothing to condemn and nothing to forgive,
and wish to taste one final austere delight,

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come! Listen to the sun's sublime discourse, and when
you have given yourself to its relentless majesty,
slowly retrace your way to the mean cities of men,
heart seven times steeped in the divine nonentity.

Sonnet

addressed to Henry III on the death of Thulène, the King's fool

—from the French of Jean Passerat

Thulène is dead, my lord. I saw his funeral.
But it is in your power to bring him back again.
Appoint some poet to inherit his domain.
Poet and fool are of the same material.
One scorns advancement. One has nowhere to advance.
In both accounts the gain is smaller than the loss.
Both kinds are quick to anger, difficult to cross.
One speaks on impulse, one leaves everything to chance.
One is light-headed, but the other one is seen
wearing a pretty cap and bells, yellow and green.
One sings his rhymes, the other capers to his chimes.
Yet we are different in one important way.
Fortune has always favored fools, or so they say.
She's seldom favored poets in the best of times.

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WILLIAM MEREDITH

Scenes from the Life of Hazard the Painter

His plans for old age

He disagrees with Simone de Beauvoir
in her civilized Gallic gloom, may she be loved
and beautiful without wrinkles until it takes
carbon dating to determine her age.

He's with Yeats, for adult education—
hand-clapping lessons for the soul,
compulsory singing lessons for the soul,
in his case, tone deaf.
He agrees with Auden, old people can show
"what grace of spirit can create"
modeling the flesh when it's no longer flashy.
That's the kind of lift he wants for his jowls,
let grace of spirit tuck up the flesh
under his ears and chin with a bare scalpel,
no anesthetic or anything, let grace of spirit
shape up his skull for afterwards.

Man and artist, he is working on his ways
so that when he becomes set in them
as old people must, for all that their souls
clap hands, for all that their spirits dance,
his ways will have grace, his pictures will have class.

He is founding a sect for the radical old,
freaks you may call them but you're wrong,
who persist in being at home in the world,
who just naturally feel it's a good bind to be in,
let the young feel as uncanny as they like.
Oldbodies, he calls them affectionately

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as he towels his own in the morning
in front of the mirror, not getting any flashier.
He thinks about Titian and Renoir a lot
in this connection. Nothing is unseemly
that takes its rise in love. If only his energy lasts.

Rhode Island

Here at the seashore they use the clouds over & over
again, like the rented animals in *Aida*.
In the late morning the land breeze
turns and now the extras are driving
all the white elephants the other way.
What language are the children shouting in?
He is lying on the beach listening.

The sand knocks like glass, struck by bare heels.
He tries to remember snow noise.
Would powder snow ping like that?
But you don't lie with your ear to powder snow.
Why doesn't the girl who takes care
of the children, a Yale girl without flaw,
know the difference between *lay* and *lie*?

He tries to remember snow, his season.
The mind is in charge of things then.
Summer is for animals, the ocean is erotic,
all that openness and swaying.
No matter how often you make love
in August you're always aware of genitalia,
your own and the half-naked others'.
Even with the gracefullest bathers
you're aware of their kinship with porpoises,
mammals disporting themselves in a blue element,
smelling slightly of fish. Porpoise Hazard
watches himself a while, like a blue movie.

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In the other hemisphere now people
are standing up, at work at their easels.
There they think about love at night
when they take off their serious clothes
and go to bed sandlessly, under blankets.

Today the children, his own among them,
are apparently shouting fluently in Portuguese,
using the colonial dialect of Brazil.
It is just as well, they have all been changed
into small shrill marginal animals,
he would not want to understand them again
until after Labor Day. He just lays there.

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JAMES MERRILL

Mouthpiece

in memoriam Marius Bewley

Might and must now cast upon the hearth,
Great mouldy figurehead, slow to ignite,

Also the mummy of a membrane-red bouquet
Cut "to straw thy way" in ages past,

Offsprings of dew and dust, of will and wilt,
Catching their deaths where the flue rages.

Set among coals to roast the atoms' apple.
Relatives, at its fat hiss of pain,

Wince on the live branch: who next?
Listen. From far within, our princess phone,

She of blue curves ajangle in darkness,
Of disembodied pangs and sparks of pitch

Bone-tingling jars the nerveless sperm
Whale's tooth etched with pennants and dead sails

At her side awake. Seaward in perfect time
Her wreathes float zeroed on moonset.

Between them silence and beneath them threat?
Tidings? Don't ask. Don't answer. Lines grow taut,

Up looms the spectral kinship after blood,
Harpoon glissando, absolute

On which in a livelier vein once bud from sleet
She plucked, and fruit from fire. Statements to burn

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Rake us, heart's ash. The oracle forever
About to be struck dumb, or repossessed,

A not till then surrendered-to
Friend or fiend keeps shawling with phenomenal

Red-blue infringements his own fiat calling
Halt to wave, to flame, that foam-lipped series,

This flickering tongue, grain of the wooden Ceres
Translated by it, blind with salt.

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HILDA MORLEY

Stefan: His Birthday

When I pick the wild fig in a hollow
watched over by sand-pines
surrounded
by the bright green scrub
shadowing the white sand,
I bring them in my hat
for you,
in the shade of the scrub-pine where the old
boat waits to be mended
Over the red rock
grow the thorn-trees,
Picasso-trees, pronged
forks splayed
above the extraordinary
sea
Odysseus came here and thought
this place enchanted because the green
water has a peacock's tail
We come upon it
suddenly in a hump of this barren
island's coastline where the sand
lies pure on the sky and sea: there
is nothing else here
Julian Huxley
could have wished to be a heron courting
his mate: rubbing the just-raised
plumes of the other bird again and
again . . . "To such a pitch of emotion
did it bring them"
or like the Crested
Grebe, to dance and dive together
amorously below the water
Neither of these

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celebrations of love is mine;
human I am less
than these, mortal I dream
of you undying:
that is why
I offer a hatful of wild figs only
to perpetuate the day

Poem

Here the sun, violet,
gives us that light Cézanne was
thankful for continually,
while at night
we are left alone,
Challenged only
by the frozen moonlight
and the stars
in their wheeling violence blow
the air from our lungs,
blood from our bodies,
rock our bellies sick—
what the stars
in their blazing courses say.
So he
slept always by nine and rose with dawning.
And that light
filled his eyes and hands and therefore
one must be exact, he said.
What so clearly
time describes on the flesh, in the eyes'
wrinkles, on the throats and the backs of hands,
must be rendered again with time's doing wrested away
and
the appalling drop of the soul through space in
gravitation.

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Over again
the earth is beautiful, again and again
and no light dissuades it and everywhere it is
beautiful again and beloved.
But the mouth cannot praise it.
You must be patient, he said, and humble
before nature.
And the work, he said,
gives courage.
Only the raised tongue clogs.
Helpless, it says: o my love, my friend.
In the evening the mountain reaches for your face.
Those last leaves carry a message,
scattered
everywhere. They ask for you
in praise.
Till the late cold strikes
they spin in obstinacy
(light
of the mountain on the brown leaf
swung
off the branch in trajectory
on the pane)
where even
the mountain-pine, bold in its drawing
is violet
turning brown.

Poem

I lean out
closing the shutters:
fading trans-
parent rose color along the
rim of the sky

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Caught in the
branches of the Roman pine the moon is
just past the sickle
stage
The loud cry of the hoopoe—
a sudden power
breaks into
the early night
The moon
amazing in
brightness, gaiety,
a welcomer

Poem

Finding the names of birds here,
of flowers, important, I say I must
know them, name them,
to be able
to call upon where their magic
resides for me: in naming them
myself—to lay hold upon whatever
quivers inside the bird-calls,
the dipping
of tail or wing—
to know it
inside my hand where power
of that sort lives
& in my fingers
wakes & becomes
an act of
language

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JOYCE CAROL OATES

Broken Connections

Are you safe there? Can you hear me?
Across the snow-maddened miles
we shout questions and answers.
The air is choppy as a river.
He is saying, *Can you hear—*
as the telephone line crackles, like laughter,
then goes dead.
It is dead.

Nothing to do but replace the receiver,
like this.
If the line is dead it is totally dead.
There is no deadness like it.

Nothing to do but put on a jacket,
go out onto the porch to watch the storm.
Pockets of snowy air explode from pine-boughs,
the porch's screen bells inward,
snow-stubbled grass runs to bloom somewhere
out of sight. . . .
There are animal-shapes in shadows,
in silence.
Though the land here is deeded
it is unknown: it is silent.

It is not your storm,
it is not your life.
Not a way of explaining the churning sky,
your quiet panic,
your curious smile of betrayal.
Your life is not prose:
you didn't write it.
You don't even have to understand it.

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The wind blows all night
now that the telephone cable failed
and words cannot be used.
You are here.
Your soul softens gradually, recognizing
the air, the snow, the silence
of broken connections.

Dreaming America

When the two-lane highway was widened
the animals retreated.
Skunks, racoons, rabbits—even their small corpses
disappeared from the road—transformed into rags
then into designs
then into stains
then nothing.

When the highway was linked to another
then to another
six lanes then nine then twelve rose
sweeping to the horizon
along measured white lines.
The polled Herefords were sold.
When the cornfields were bulldozed
the farmhouses at their edges turned into shanties,
the outbuildings fell.

When the fields were paved over
Frisch's Big Boy rose seventy-five feet in the air.
The *Sunoco* and *Texaco* and *Gulf* signs competed
on hundred-foot stilts
like eyeballs on stalks
white optic-nerves
miraculous.
Illuminated at night.

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Where the useless stretch of trees lay
an orange sphere like a golf ball
announces the Shopping Mall, open
for Thursday evening shopping.
There, tonight, droves of teenagers hunt
one another, alert on the memorized pavement.

Where did the country go?—cry the travellers, soaring
overhead. *Where did the country go?*—ask the strangers.
The teenagers never ask.

Where horses grazed in a dream that had no history,
tonight a thirteen-year-old girl stands dreaming
into the window of Levitz's Record Shop.
We drive past, soaring. We disappear.
We come back.

Flight

Christmas morning. Glowing-white sands.
High clouds speeding toward noon,
like our car.
We leap into focus only
when fear subsides.

Above unreadable swamps hover wide-winged hawks
and below are crook-necked white birds,
nameless.
Here are original things.
Flaming in the perpetual sun are flamingos:
they glide like sleepwalkers, on pencil-thin legs,
then squawk themselves awake.
We awake, and drive away.

BOMBING RAIDS RESUMED—
a glimpsed unpaid-for headline,

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a Miami newspaper.
We drive away in a greater hurry now
to reach noon at Alapha Key, from there
to Naples, on the Gulf, from there to
macaws bright as painted birds, trained
by prison inmates to perform:
to paint, play poker, to ride bird-sized bicycles,
to keep to their cross-staved perches, unchained.
They shriek melodramatically,
but without rage.

In the roadside restaurants are waitresses with stiff stacked hair
and patient, creased faces, working on Christmas Day.
Our mothers' ages, they hurry from tables to kitchen to tables
smiling endlessly, without focus,
as we drive away into a glowering sky.
It is all right, it will transform itself in the end.
But the gasoline is high-octane and propels us away—
CASUALTIES SOAR ON BOTH SIDES—
to the edge of the hard-packed sand
where droves of sandpipers flit, in fluid darts,
in one direction and then suddenly in another,
reversing themselves in communal magic.
Our heads are thunderous with surf
and nowhere left to go.

Love Poem

Taking the curve of the road too fast
the car swerves, tires hit gravel,
fence posts never seen before lurch crazily
then are righted again.
A miracle.
Our pulses now race in a single spasm:
other curves lie ahead.
If we die today we die together.

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WILLIAM STAFFORD

Always

Inside the trees, where tomorrow
hides along with years, tomorrow
stirs. And there my sisters
never born touch lips to the bark
and begin to sing:

Brother of Air, Brother of Sun,
please tell our story, that we
may live in the brief wind.

Wherever I stand I hear the trees
petition so. By listening
I know I'm born. By turning
the forest back toward itself
I live as a friend of trees:

Listen together; be ready.
You may be born. I touch the bark
and call deep as I can:
Part of me.

Those of Us Left

Some of us Indians used to have leaves
and in the spring felt a strange unrest:
nowhere we walked was quite the place;
nothing was quite the thing that saves.
Others told us, "You must find roots
of your own, and the slant of sun for each day."
So out through the trees we went walking away.

Now, in open woods in the spring
we become strangely happy-afraid,

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those of us left in the sunlight,
arms out, feet feeling the touch of the earth,
alive with leaves.

Night Cries: A Legend

After old rain babies crawled from the mud,
cried in the marshes, their tears glistening
into the river, the poor man's tomb.

Spearing frogs, the tall birds came,
their legs like reeds. Years later, a city
stood there, conquered by many, then free.

People talk, their voices trying,
but none yet knowing another's whole name,
or what tall bird still walks the reeds.

One Thing at a Time

Ours is the faith that leaves mountains where they are.

The star we stare at helps. It holds while the rest
of the world goes around all change. Unremembered
turns make our backward trail, where hills give up
and ripple toward owls' evening.

We can't get it back, the dollar in the sky
that hung in the tree: no matter if we're afraid,
the moon will rise. We're dungeons for the sun to share,
fire in the grate, light for sleep's new dreams.

Now is the flavor that how things go becomes.
All that's around us enters the onward dream.

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Said in the Evening

We almost always call when a day
goes by: "Listen, stranger—
weren't you here yesterday? I know
rain was here, and, yes, the sun went by.
If you weren't, will you tell me
a way to hold what happens,
no matter how or why?"

"Yes, I will tell you: I was not
here yesterday, and you were someone
else then—right? You went away,
as I did. And the children?—they
all are gone. Wife, too,
or husband—now somebody else. Better?
Maybe—surely not the same."

"But God was here, and God is here."

"Yes, God will never change."

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JAMES WRIGHT

Raphael on the Hilltop in Urbino

Even a blind man has to feel
At peace with his eyes.

When I close mine, I find myself
In full flight.

Turkeys pecking their own skin become
Terrible, and veins of the sunlight

Become terrible, become wings, become
A relief hillside.

That is why I became.
I closed my eyes, to see what I could see.

First the black head rose into dusk
Out of local stone.

I tried to cheat, but some lizard inside me
Darted and led me into my dark again.

And so I walked up that long and long
Hill dreaming and awake of Walt Whitman.

Back in my self I saw a plenty of brilliant
Ghosts, maples, whiteoaks, dreams of shattered girls,

Dreams dancing alone at the Eagle's Club
And young men my sons bayoneted across the Potomac.

I walked in my own sleep, I longed to bear with me
My wounded America back home.

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But suddenly my foot pawed forward on the sky.
Open your eyes, a voice said.

A voice said, open your eyes
And be the beloved.

Standing alone beneath his solid stone shadow,
The dream of his hand in flight,

I felt my heart drawn clearly at last,
And I opened my eyes.

To Marcel Dupré, Organist of Saint Sulpice

Singing alone in the only place I will ever know,
I am combing my hair this morning.

My three loves are going to make me late,
Because the Spartans sat down beside the rock
And combed their hair into the sea.

M. Dupré, may I come home to you and weep
In secret? I have good reason.
I want you to come over and sit down with me alone,
Just you and me. Let them go flower.

Every time I wake up in Paris
I see women combing their hair.
I know very well this morning over
At the Luxembourg Gardens the slight
And plump blossoms are turning green,
A sheer despair of summer.

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But ah, M. Dupré, I have everything
I ever longed for except
The water, tousled and amazing.
What does the water think of
Rushed through their hair?

M. Dupré, I bring you with me
Karen East who is young in Paris,
Laura Lee who is young in Paris,
And my love young, all three.
The fates have changed their names
Again, and now they are beautiful women,
Drowsy, tousled, half-awake, laughing.
They have kept me waiting half-awake in your music,
And the cathedral of Saint Sulpice is the water
That combs their hair, it is the sea, it is
The secret stone.

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BERT O. STATES

The Word-Pictures in *Hamlet*

"Something too much of this."
—*Hamlet*

I IMAGINE THE ARRAS THROUGH WHICH HAMLET stabs Polonius as a richly figured tapestry of scenes from Renaissance life. Nothing in the text suggests such an idea and I am not urging it on readers or scene designers. I cite it as a private instance of how a fiction teaches one to fill in details which are not there at all and to do so in the style of those which are. This spilling over of a play's "known" or expressed world into what we might call its own blank spaces is one of the most intriguing dimensions of the process of metaphor, and one for which we scarcely have a good critical language. For example, in a slight exchange like "Have you had quiet guard?/ Not a mouse stirring." there is, obviously, a very palpable mouse stirring. In that miraculous organ Hamlet calls the mind's eye one sees it scurrying along a dank wall of the imagination and disappearing into such darkness as might shroud a ghost. So the mouse—like the glow worm, the woodcock, the mole, the porpentine, the weasel, the kite, the crab and the serpent—is a creature of some brief influence in the creation of the unique space in which *Hamlet*'s story unfolds.

All plays, certainly all Elizabethan plays, create their visual worlds by such suggestive means. But *Hamlet's,* as we all know, is especially luxurious: it hangs in the air more densely, more variously, than other dramatic worlds. For instance, there is very little sense of a thick periphery of "things" in *Macbeth*'s metaphysical spaces, though there are rooks and wood choughs enough. Somehow, everything seems critically in thrall to the central deed: even the stones prate of the murderer's whereabouts. *Hamlet*'s world, by contrast, opens out far beyond the decayed garden we hear so much about in the criticism. It is a universe made up of an almost encyclopedic procession of persons, animals, objects, processes, and instances from rural, professional, and household affairs, many of them strangely self-contained and portable, all

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spun out by characters who, even in Shakespeare's immense gallery, have an unusual habit of getting detained in the making of word-pictures. More matter and less art, the Queen reminds Polonius, though Laertes might have said the same to her as she reports his sister's death:

> There is a willow grows askant the brook,
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream:
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
> There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook.

Not that this passage is in any sense over-embroidered. On the contrary, it is fine poetry fully and symbolically warranted by the occasion: the perfect exit for Ophelia. What is curious about it, and so much at home in this play, is the way it swerves through these liberal shepherds and cold maids who come trooping in from the country on the stems of long purples which are themselves but garlands on the event. The eye hardly sees Ophelia at all; it sees rather the participation of nature in her drowning. She is, you might say, overwhelmed by scenery.[1]

As the play itself is. From the other end of the spectrum, let me cite an example which will reveal this same temptation running away with Shakespeare and producing one of those passages directors invariably cut. It occurs in Act IV where Claudius is plotting Hamlet's downfall with Laertes. Although Laertes has just given every sign of being ahead of Claudius, Claudius feels he must be made even "riper" for the treachery, and so goes on to praise him for that special "part" which will turn the trick:

LAERTES. What part is that, my lord?

[1] In fact, Coleridge was so taken by the passage that he saw Ophelia *as* scenery: "Who does not see her, like a little projection of land into a lake or stream, covered with spring-flowers, lying quietly reflected in the great waters, but at length being undermined and loosened, becomes a floating faery isle, and after a brief vagrancy sinks almost without an eddy!" Quoted from *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (Capricorn Books, New York, 1959), p. 155.

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KING. A very riband in the cap of youth,
Yet needful too; for youth no less becomes
The light and careless livery that it wears
Than settled age his sables and his weeds,
Importing health and graveness. Two months since,
Here was a gentleman of Normandy:—
I've seen myself, and served against, the French,
And they can well on horseback: but this gallant
Had witchcraft in't; he grew unto his seat;
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,
As had he been incorpsed and demi-natured
With the brave beast. So far he topp'd my thought,
That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
Come short of what he did.
LAERTES. A Norman wasn't?
KING. A Norman.
LAERTES. Upon my life, Lamond.
KING. The very same.

Of course, devious devices require devious approaches. But here the tail, so to speak, is plainly wagging the horse. From the dramatic standpoint, Lamond is summoned on a suspiciously slim, if not altogether avoidable, mission and allowed a full fifteen lines of "shapes and tricks" before his function becomes evident. What induced Shakespeare to sandwich such a portrait between "What part is that, my lord?" (l.77) and "[Why . . .] art and exercise in your defense" (l.98)? Was it, as one unhappy critic says, his "unconquerable impulse to pour out poetry on the slightest provocation"? Or is it, as some suggest, that Lamond was one of those real gentlemen at Elizabeth's court who (like the little eyases) was simply good copy for an audience which liked to see its own reflection in plays, even at the expense of a thickening plot?

My point, of course, is that Lamond is a symptom of a habit which "o'erleavens" this play, to use Hamlet's word, and reaches into the very rhythm and logic of its development. So often one senses in *Hamlet* the working of an irresistible principle of growth (I would call it cancer if the word had any healthy connotations) which causes the images, examples, and proofs to resist a purely auxiliary service in the business at hand and to

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struggle, like Lamond and the liberal shepherds, toward a life of their own. The astonishing thing about *Hamlet* is the sheer number of lines that are devoted to an elaboration of the elsewhere, the other, the previous, or the timeless: what we might, for general purposes, call the atmospheric content. I call such passages word-pictures because so often they seem to be framed, or to stand out in a peculiar way, like scenic turn-outs on the highway of the plot. But they are not always portraits of people, or landscapes. Very often, they take the form of "documents," or essayistic set-speeches on natural law (for instance, Claudius' remarks above on youth and settled age). Moreover, the word-pictures themselves are only the chunkiest manifestation of the habit. The very grammatical soil from which they spring is so fecund that it induces prolixity of other kinds: over and over, we find characters falling into a *seriatim* rhythm in which they seem compelled to inventory a thing or process within an inch of its life before passing on to more urgent matters. Thus the structure of Hamlet's "Tis not alone my inky cloak, dear mother . . . , Nor . . . , Nor . . . , No, nor . . . , Nor . . . , Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief. . . ." is a common one, not only to Hamlet, but to the other characters as well. Witness Ophelia's Kydian survey of Hamlet's "o'erthrown" qualities:

> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,
> Th'observed of all observers. . . .

Or that great talker the Ghost ("Brief let me be") taking time to "unfold" (among other things) two anatomizations of the body in a state of seizure; or Claudius on unmanly grief; or Rosenkrantz, very late in his career as a silent yes-man, suddenly breaking loose for thirteen lines on "the cess of majesty"; or the Player on the rugged Pyrrhus; Polonius on the proper conduct of departing sons or the genres of drama; Hamlet cataloguing the sources of corruption in particular men, or wiping the tables of his memory, or Hamlet on acting, on suicide—Hamlet, in fact, on almost anything.

I don't know how far this habit ought to be documented, or to what extent I ought to answer the obvious charge that such an

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embarrassment of riches was the common dividend of every Shakespeare play, and if a little more embarrassing than usual in *Hamlet* it was simply because Shakespeare had more on his mind. In any case, the question of whether these word-pictures are excessive to dramatic needs invites nothing but an excursion into personal taste. My purpose has been to set them into a somewhat exaggerated relief from the rest of *Hamlet* in order to make a certain stylistic tendency more visible to the eye. I have no idea where word-pictures begin and end, as distinct from ordinary imagery, but it is clear that Shakespeare was under some compulsion, beyond simple self-indulgence, to crowd *Hamlet* with an unusual amount of scenic and atmospheric ballast, so much so that it has a significant effect on our options for interpreting the play.

We all have our own impressions of the *Hamlet* universe. But in reading criticism of the play's imagery, one has the odd sense of getting only the gloomy and canker'd part of its world. For instance, Caroline Spurgeon, at the end of her very dreary picture of Denmark, remarks that "the ugliness" of the disease imagery *is* "counter-acted and the whole lighted up by flashes of sheer beauty." The problem here, I suspect, is that she had no "scientific" means of dealing with these "flashes," except in an offhand way, since image analysis is based on the computer principle of statistical re-enforcement. Once the critic has detected a thick nest of images (say, disease), his apparatus will drop only those cards which belong in the nest or can somehow be correlated into a larger complex of cooperating nests (decay, death, disease, etc., in *Hamlet;* the "babe" and "clothing" figures in *Macbeth*). I have no quarrel with the procedure itself, as far as it goes, but in *Hamlet's* case it seems to me that the picture-making function of the imagery is rather more complicated than simply pointing arrows at the hidden impostume. There is another whole world in these flashes of sheer beauty and it is precisely its presence that enables us to diagnose *Hamlet's* disease as being of a different order of magnitude than the disease, say, of *Troilus and Cressida* or a virulent play like *The Duchess of Malfi.*

Take, as an example, Claudius' image, "a very riband in the cap of youth." As far as I can tell, it does not fall into any cluster

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of "youth" images. You can't attach any obvious thematic significance to it, as you can to such images as "the mildewed ear" or "the fat weed that roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf." Is the image lost, therefore, because it does not re-appear in successive variations? I think there is a sense in which the "cap of youth" is participating in something very important, though far less pointed in its effect than the "disease" group. And that is that you get a quick glimpse of the "light and careless" lad beneath it, straight out of Franz Hals, speeding about some mischief or other that has nothing to do with the murky goings-on in "the tragedy." By himself he is insignificant and instantly lost in the flow of Claudius' words. But his *quality* is not, for it is repeated in countless portraits of "free" creatures like him who are indentured to no crisis, come betwixt no mighty opposites—in short, do no very heavy work in the plot except that of keeping the air crowded with life of a special kind. For convenience, I will call this universe of "free" images the play's counter-world, though it would be impossible to separate it cleanly from the world it is countering. But it includes all those word-pictures, however fleeting or extended, which we recognize on instinct as belonging to an independent and stable order of nature that is apparent not so much in our memory of particular things in it as in our subliminal awareness that some new manifestation of it is never long absent from the poetry. Its effect, the sense of its presence, may even be as subtle as that of a grace note in a musical composition.

Before going on, it seems necessary to put this idea into a wider perspective. The sort of "free" imagery I am talking about is quite common in the comedies and history plays.[2] Here, however, it does not compose a counter-world at all, as I am using the term now, but merely a wider or more tolerant one. In fact, the whole affective movement of comedy and history (less so, perhaps, history) is toward inclusiveness, toward life-celebration, and this enables them, as genres less severely dramatic than tragedy, to mingle more varied qualities of nature without thematic confusion. To illustrate how imagery normally behaves in the

[2] I hope this word "free" isn't taken too strictly by the reader. Anything truly "free" in a play or poem would, by definition, be superfluous. I mean simply that there is a kind of imagery which is unusually self-sustaining, or general, though it may, at the same time, have a clear function in the plot.

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tragic world, on the other hand, we might cite *King Lear*. From the standpoint of word-picturization, it is perhaps as crowded as *Hamlet*. The point about *Lear*, however, is that its profusion of life and elemental scenery is critically bound to the same overwhelming revolution of Fortune's wheel in which Lear is de-civilized and "accommodated" among the beasts of the earth. In other words, in *Lear* we have a standard case of Ulysses' Law: that is, of a natural world being "untuned" and totally transformed into the context of the tragic qualm. When Lear is cast into the elements, nature, literally charged by cosmic lightning, loses any neutrality and qualitative range it may have possessed before the "division." Professor Clemen is right in saying that the words "atmosphere" and "background" no longer suffice in *Lear* "to designate what of nature, landscape and animal world is evoked by the imagery. This 'atmosphere' becomes a world in itself." Very often, this sense of a qualitatively imploding universe is so powerful in Shakespeare that it becomes a distinct rhetorical feature of the tragedy. In the centers of plays like *Lear* and *Timon* action virtually ceases while "each thing" is catalogued and re-assigned a place in the fallen world. As an instance in which this principle is somewhat compromised, we might cite *Antony and Cleopatra*, whose sympathetic bonds with history and romance seem to enable it to maintain a steady impression of spaciousness and sumptuous diversity—of *some* of nature, at least, staying in place while kingdoms topple.

It would be silly to argue against the current of three centuries that *Hamlet* is a bright tragedy. What I do suggest is that *Hamlet*'s world, the "things" in its visualized space, describe a qualitative range which is uniquely broad, even in Shakespeare's comprehensive vision of life, and as a result, the poetry is not allowed to submit completely to the monochromatic and negative influence of the disease polarity. To go a step farther, in plays like *Lear, Macbeth,* and *Othello* one is hard-pressed to find anything at all that is not thoroughly attached to the *immediate* tragic theme. For instance, until Macbeth's one shot at summing things up ("Tommorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow . . ."), you can scarcely imagine him making a general speech like Hamlet's "So oft it chances in particular men," though it is a better diagnosis of Macbeth's flaw than of anyone's in Denmark. It isn't

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because Macbeth is less perceptive than Hamlet, but because he is too busy with a set of escalating fears to be idling over behavioral recipes for the species. The thing which differentiates *Hamlet* from the other tragedies, in fact, is its incredible capacity to absorb universal knowledge in almost undigested form. The characters of *Hamlet* are abnormally axiomatic, as the twenty-one columns of quotations in Bartlett's will testify (*Lear* gets seven). They have what Prosser Frye calls an "extra-mural portion" of lifelikeness that is not precisely called for by the plot they are involved in. For instance, Claudius' injunction to Hamlet to throw to earth his unprevailing woe is obviously a strategy for wooing Hamlet back to court society where he can be watched; but it is also an eloquently expressed home truth, like so much other "advice" in the play, and its effect is to give Claudius a degree of wisdom and reliability that is, strictly speaking, in excess of the demands of his character as a villain. A more familiar example of this effect occurs in Polonius' farewell to Laertes, which is often played for laughs, as if Polonius were droning out clichés from his chapbooks. But that doesn't in the least diminish the impression it has, in the text at any rate, of putting him momentarily above his own foolishness. A similar extra-mural portion of "life" is present in Hamlet's "passion's slave" speech to Horatio, which Hamlet himself finally realizes is getting out of hand. Of course, by this time we are so used to Hamlet's lectures on natural law that we scarcely notice the plot has stopped and that character has become the expressive instrument of an almost autonomous world of moral philosophy. This is not a criticism of Shakespeare's characterization in *Hamlet* but an observation of its peculiar adaptability to almost any occasion. Image critics are reluctant to notice that Hamlet's is not the only exquisite sensibility in the play; he is simply the *primus inter pares* of a whole cry of artist-philosophers who cannot seem to move without making an aphorism that is both visually rich and morally apt, or pressing distinctions to the point of over-scrupulousity. In this regard, Polonius is not only the perfect foil for Hamlet's wit, but a "shadow" Hamlet as well. His indulgence in word-play, in "art" at the expense of "matter," is but a comic prolongation of Hamlet's philosophic word-play and scruple-hunting. This is most apparent, of course, in the scene in which

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he comes to the King and Queen to explain the cause of Hamlet's madness—a mission of some urgency—and gets hopelessly trapped in a wonderful thicket of puns on his key terms. In short, just as Dogberry's malapropistic humor is the perfect kind for a play which thrives on mis-information and incorrect understanding, so Polonius' obsession with the nuances of language is the perfect "comic relief" for *Hamlet*.

This family characteristic of compulsive "documentation" may be encouraged, in part, by the revenge play's problem of having to flesh out what is normally a rather direct and simple act of violence. This brings us to the issue of Hamlet's delay which is, on the whole, a pretty boring one by now. My interest in it here is not thematic or psychological, but purely aesthetic. In any case, to lay the source of the delay on the revenge drama itself would seem to augur for a short play on the order of *Macbeth* rather than this monster in baggy trousers Shakespeare left us. Still, delay and style (as I have been discussing style here) are intimately connected in *Hamlet*. Francis Berry, among others, hints at this at the end of his section on *Hamlet* in *The Shakespearean Inset:* "All through its course," he says, "the action . . .—because [it] is throttled, its straightforward frontal plotline is impeded—tends to explode into compensatory Insets. They are corridors retreating to an enigmatic but fascinating hinterland, often minatory or pathetic, and it is this hinterland, which builds up behind the imprisoned *Hamlet* exposed on the stage, that gives this play its depth." While this nicely supports my argument, the "minatory and pathetic" aspects of this hinterland seem over-stressed. I am not trying to whitewash *Hamlet* into a pastoral kingdom but to see the "depth" of its world as a product of pictorial range and variety. That is (to put it in the form of a planetary metaphor), the diseased center of the *Hamlet* universe, though exceedingly powerful, is succeeded by a series of spheres, or concentric planes of imagery, some caught in the gravitational pull of the "impostume," some threatening and pathetic (in the general ominousness of tragic tone itself), and still others, as we near the perimeter of the qualitative world, benign or neutral. The quality thus becomes more positive, or "healthy," as one moves out and we enter a sphere of influence which might be summed up best in Schiller's

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observation about Homer's poetry: that it shows us "the quiet existence and operation of things in accordance with their natures." I am indebted for this remark to Erich Auerbach, to whom I turned remembering that his discussion of Homer's style in *Mimesis* touched on these same problems. It was interesting to see that Auerbach was in fact trying to account for the "retarding element" of Homer's poetry, or the tendency of its movement to be "opposed to any tensional and suspensive striving toward a goal." In short, the respect in which Homer is an epic, not a dramatic poet. And it consists, he says, in illuminating every detail as clearly as possible, "so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by." It would certainly be stretching the point to say that a tragedy as ponderously dramatic as *Hamlet* was engaged in any such "epic" business. But it is hard not to see a connection between a word so provocatively Hamletic as "retardation" and an artistic technique whereby imagery and visual detail become so prominent as to make the text seem "fraught with foreground," if I may revise Auerbach's famous term for my own uses.

Perhaps the best example of Homeric illumination in *Hamlet* is, in fact, a scene out of Troy itself, and far from a benign one. I refer to the "rugged Pyrrhus" speech which is a highly stylized succession of word-pictures so inexorably detailed and obsessed with "getting everything in" that even the windy Polonius is soon bored. Like many of Homer's great battle pictures (for instance, Hector storming the Argive wall in Chapter XII), this speech is really longer in the recitation than the action it describes; at least it seems to unfold in a time-lazy drift from detail to detail, like a camera fondly exploring the surface of a huge classical fresco —even stopping altogether at

> For lo, his sword,
> Which was declining on the milky head
> Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick.
> So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
> And like a neutral to his will and matter
> Did nothing.

The thematic implications of the Pyrrhus passage are well-known. What impresses one about it is that the play can afford to hire

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such a long-winded actor to echo its central action of vengeance at such a remove. The presence of these sixty-odd lines in *Hamlet,* for whatever reasons scholars suggest, is one of the best indications of the play's open susceptibility to metaphoric expansion. Taken as a symptom of over-all style, the Pyrrhus speech perfectly illustrates the play's act-scene ratio, to apply one of Kenneth Burke's concepts. That is, any act (or, thinking more here in terms of retardation, *non*-act) becomes credible by virtue of occurring in an appropriate setting, or one which implicitly contains the qualities the act is to make explicit. Following the idea of retardation into the play's language, in other words, the proper rhetorical scene for *Hamlet* might be one which was continually jamming the circuits leading to action, or more correctly, jamming the audience's expectations regarding action—which is to say vengeance—as *the true subject* of the play. In short, the poet, like the Player here, would throw the attention of his audience onto a careful elaboration of the moral and emotional conditions which give the act its significance. Professor Stoll and others have argued that anyone who has ever seen *Hamlet* on the stage wouldn't know there was a delay problem at all. One couldn't agree more, but my hunch is that theatre audiences rarely see the complete *Hamlet* that armchair critics study so closely, and what they don't get to see would certainly contain a great number of these passages I am calling word-pictures.

The problem might be put like this: the source of Hamlet's delay, or doubt, or "bafflement," as Eliot more broadly sums it up—whatever it is that causes him to ask why "this thing's to do" and critics to supply a library of answers—is not only to be sought in Hamlet's private psychology but in the entire play, even in scenes where Hamlet himself is not present. In other words, we should not be looking for an objective correlative that will explain Hamlet's motives but for an aesthetic one that might explain Shakespeare's; and my suggestion is that Hamlet's bafflement, and by extension ours, is ultimately "motivated" by the nature of the universe Shakespeare put him in and his unique relation to it.

There is one speech in the play which symbolizes this relation perfectly. It is Hamlet's immortal answer to his two adder-

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fanged friends on the cause of his distraction. Beginning with "I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth," it gradually swells to an incomparable performance that is by turns both plaint and hymn of praise. Here Hamlet regards the entire world in an emotional state we might describe as *nostalgia for the present,* which is to say nostalgia for a valued world from which he has, "of late," been estranged. Nowhere is Hamlet more brilliant than in this speech and nowhere else in the play are the diseased center and the counter-world brought into such a sharp conjunction. Here, in miniature, is the full circumference of the *Hamlet* universe, extending from the sterile promontory of Elsinore to the brave o'erhanging firmament, the majestical roof fretted with golden fire; and man, within it, is both the quintessence of dust and the god-like paragon of animals, depending on how thinking makes it so. Thinking has made it very undelightful for Hamlet, but the essential feature of the speech is that Hamlet never once hints that the universe itself has been altered by the vapors of the mind; it is altered only *in* the mind, and outside, as Hamlet knows and can still eloquently report, it remains what it has always been, man's tragedies notwithstanding. It is this capacity to be self-immersed, bound in his nutshell, and yet to see the kingdom of infinite space, and all value and beauty in it, that distinguishes Hamlet from the other tragic heroes. It is also what distinguishes the play, which has, in its compulsive fashion, set before us, in minute detail, the world Hamlet sees in this speech.

In fact, we may describe *Hamlet* as a play about a man who is *in*-formed from *without:* he is summoned from grief to the platform where he discovers a truth he expresses thereafter in countless ironies and puns—that anything in nature, from clouds to kings, may also be something else in disguise. This truth, so bitter in its local implications, is what isolates Hamlet from the company of men, but it is also what activates his sympathy for all things in nature which are behaving naturally. In fact, Hamlet's final recognition that "the readiness is all" may be seen not simply as a fall into Stoical indifference, based on his having gazed at the world through Yorick's eyeless skull, but as the pronouncement of a man who has exhausted wonder and regret and "comes to rest" *in* nature, prepared finally to take his place

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in the transitional order of which his life and death will mark but a pale event in endless time.

The spiritual dynamic of *Hamlet* is thus the very opposite of that of *Othello,* a play about a man who is informed from *within*—if one thinks of Iago as an extension of Othello's overactive imagination; and more importantly, of Othello's intense habit of equating the All with his One, putting the whole cosmological weight of the world on Desdemona's virtue (as Lear does on his daughters' love and Macbeth on his murder). From the outset, our impressions of the universe of value at stake in the play are controlled by Othello's misapprehension of reality, and we observe the inevitable collapse of the "Othello system" because at its center—for this reason—it is dangerously open to contrivance.

In *Hamlet,* we have a very different, far more ambiguous and complex, sense of the relationship between the world of value and the heroic company in which we experience it. Hamlet may in fact be an even bigger egoist than Othello, but he is no solipsist; he sees the world pluralistically, or, as Claudius would say, with one drooping and one auspicious eye. His very difficulty, if I may quote something I have said elsewhere, is that he confronts the entire range of value and can, until the end, find no clear place in it for himself. He hovers, strangely alone, above the spectrum of excellence and flaw we observe in the play, and in his generosity and cruelty is himself a paradoxical manifestation of both poles.[3] No doubt his motives go much deeper than this. What I have tried to express here, however, is not a new explanation of Hamlet but the sense of something *infinite* in him, and in the play, that has always awed me and finally makes the question of what the play means less interesting than what it contains.

[3] See *Irony and Drama: A Poetics* (Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 47.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Modern Dance Now

DURING THE 1972-73 SEASON José Limón died. Martha Graham surfaced after a two-year descent into a personal purgatory, vowing never to dance again but to lead the efforts to preserve her past choreography. During the season more than fifty modern dance companies were eligible to tour with financial assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts, and ten or twelve modern dance companies bombed on Broadway. Merce Cunningham was trashed at Brooklyn Academy, and Twyla Tharp choreographed the smash hit of the year for the Joffrey Ballet.

Where is modern dance now?

We have to redefine our terms a bit. Modern dance, when it was being invented, was any concert dance form—predominantly American—that wasn't classical ballet. You could tell it because it was done in bare feet; people moved in ways that hadn't been thought of before, working more on the ground than in the air, more in the torso than the limbs; their attitudes toward music, subject matter, the body were unconventional; and modern dance was always created and performed outside the established temples of culture.

It wasn't hard to separate modern dancers from ballet dancers—they did it themselves. What they wanted more than anything else was to make each dance a unique statement on its own terms. If a way of moving didn't already exist to say what the dance wanted to say, they found new ways. Each dance presented a new challenge that demanded new forms. The modern dancers were supreme individualists, and they sometimes came to be thought of as cultists because, unlike the graphic artist, who invents and executes in one stroke, they had to train other dancers to do their movement before they could create anything. So the modern dance became synonymous not with a single style, but with the names of the people who were developing styles, and with the dancers whose physical presence made those styles real.

Today the modern dance has long since acknowledged the usefulness of ballet technique for training the body to move in highly specialized ways. The power and flexibility of modern dance infiltrated classical ballet too. This intermingling has resulted in a synthesis, really a separate style: the modern ballet idiom practiced by a number of important choreographers here and in Europe. On an anonymous stage somewhere, without a program or dancers identifiable from any paticular company, you'd have to get down to the fine points to distinguish Glen Tetley from John Butler from Gerald Arpino from Hans van Manen from Norman Walker from Lar Lubovitch—from Alvin Ailey and John Cranko!

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In modern dance's early days—which I would define as ending by about 1960—the choreographer was paramount. But the choreographer was thought to engage in an almost unconscious, even mystical act: he or she made dances out of an urge for self-expression. In 1973 Martha Graham told me: "I didn't know what the word choreography meant. I wanted something to dance." Everything in modern dance was directed toward the realization of this creative urge—techniques, dancers, companies, the giving of concerts and the establishing of schools, all served the moment when the choreographer was ready to work out a new idea. And each new idea, even if it didn't survive in the company's repertory, was presumed to advance the choreographer's knowledge or add something to the dance art. A new dance was a major event that had nothing to do with press agents.

If this was a highly romantic view of creativity, the times favored it. Modern dance in the 1930's and '40s had abundant talents and a need to explore. Economically it was possible to get something done on a modest scale, and to consider yourself an important figure if only a few hundred people ever came in contact with your work. The idea that every modern dancer had within him or her a potential choreographic talent was fostered long after enough alternative styles had been devised to satisfy the most rebellious student, long after the search for new dance ideas became an academic exercise.

After that first explosion of creativity, the modern dance began to weaken. After Graham and Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm came a second generation, Limón, Anna Sokolow, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, still discovering but also using past discoveries, seeing what styles could do, perfecting forms, getting in touch with their audiences. No one thought they were doing anything but modern dance. But in 1966 a single work brought together so many post-modern dance concerns that I now see it as a turning point, a symbol of a new era. The work was Paul Taylor's *Orbs*.

Orbs shocked and dismayed me at the time. It was, as far as I could see, a ballet, despite its non-classical movement and bare feet. I couldn't accept the idea that a modern dance choreographer would deliberately make a dance easy for the audience to understand, that he would relinquish the obligation to search for new movement or new forms, or that he would use "classical" music (Beethoven's late string quartets) to create a programmatic, illustrative dance. I couldn't explain the calculated, almost businesslike way *Orbs* looked. Taylor either had to be regressing or going commercial.

Orbs wasn't the first modern dance to do any of these things, but it was probably the first to acknowledge all of them as not merely by-products or shortcomings of the creative process. Everything that the modern dance had been trying so desperately to avoid, Paul Taylor allowed to happen in *Orbs*. And the act was all the more telling because Paul Taylor was not some failed genius grasping at expedients.

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If he betrayed the insiders, he opened up modern dance to an entirely new audience which had found the art esoteric and difficult before.

Orbs came at a time of growing curiosity about dance, and it was endorsed repeatedly in the nation's most influential dance pages by Clive Barnes, who had lately arrived at *The New York Times* from England and was having trouble with the more rigorous manifestations of modern dance. Barnes admitted that he thought modern dance was best when it looked most like ballet, and he predicted hyped-up theatrical forms that ideally would borrow from both modern and balletic sensibilities.

Perhaps this was the only answer to the decline of modern dance's potent founding generation at the same time that truckloads of excellent young dancers were coming out of school and looking for action. *The Times'* endorsement of eclectic theatricality may have only legitimized what was going on anyway. The modern dance companies that originated in the 1950's and 60's survived, if they survived at all, by figuring out how to look more acceptable to their audiences, their critics, and their backers.

In one part of its existence, modern dance now is just going through what happened to most of the other arts long ago. It is establishing a popular version of itself. For those of us who have always taken dance seriously, it's hard to realize that what a lot of people are doing isn't serious in an art sense at all. They aren't trying to be creative; they're trying to be popular. Corresponding roughly to the jazz-folk-rock area in music, pop dance is entertaining, very well produced, and doesn't tax the audience's mind unduly. I might drop in on pop dance every once in a while to keep track of the volatile pop sensibility, but I'm beginning to realize I can't go there to satisfy my soul.

Pop dance is in its infancy, and trying to distinguish it from art dance is a murky, often emotional process. Pop uses the techniques and staging of serious dance—the ballet idiom for brilliance and clarity, the modern for expressiveness and currency. Dance critics rather than pop critics still review this new form, and our pervasive dislike or our contorted efforts to get with it aren't helpful.

I can see many reasons for the success of pop dance, and I think it's capable of making great progress. If we stopped thinking of it as commercialized modern dance, or pretentious show dance, maybe we'd stop being disappointed in it. Producers, choreographers, critics, fund-granters need to clarify for themselves what it is, and adjust their priorities for evaluating and funding.

Although dance is ipso facto supposed to lose money—and the entire dance field is geared to non-profit operation and substantial public funding—pop dance does very well at the box office. Producers like City Center and Brooklyn Academy often use big ticket sellers like Alvin Ailey and Maurice Bejart to offset the losses of less popular com-

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panies. But invariably it's the producers who get the advantage. I don't think the companies themselves are making money yet, not on the scale that pop musicians are making it. Nor, under the hand-to-mouth financing of the non-profit system, can they experiment with their own resources, find ways to reach more people, and make better spectacles.

Very few modern dancers actually admit they're doing pop, but almost all companies, lacking the clear choreographic identity that was the original reason for having so many companies, are adopting whatever else will bring them an audience. Sometimes it's a very individual company style. Louis Falco, one of José Limón's heirs, has allowed his mentor's strong, successive movement to become more lush and round. Falco's dancers have a sexy, indulgent way of doing movement that turns people on, especially other dancers. He also has incorporated some of the techniques of improvisation and group encounter, including verbalizing. Some of his dances are so naturalistic, in the old Nichols and May style, that you begin to think the dancers are revealing their real personalities.

Falco's modifications of modern dance are polished versions of what in other cases looks like degeneration. Modern dance technique, whether X's technique or Y's, was especially demanding because it required the student to replicate someone else's movement patterns in his own body. Dancers went around from studio to studio in the early days, to find a technique that fitted them. Now most of the techniques are borrowed, hand-me-down, a little of this and a little of that, all aimed, more or less healthily, at producing a mobile, adaptable dancer rather than a more focussed, more limited X Dancer or Y Dancer.

What young dancers are doing looks to me more and more technical, and less and less pulled together. They seem able to do anything that is asked of them, except create that edge of assertiveness by which we recognize an artist. They're good at groups, and often develop a warm, easy ensemble style, though what they have to say with it may be muddled or trite.

For the first time in modern dance history, we are seeing a considerable amount of "repertory"—that is, new and old works by many choreographers being performed by one company. No longer does the modern dance company act as the exclusive interpretive instrument of its own director-choreographer and no one else. This is a big shift for modern dance, reflecting again the decline of the overriding artist-ego. So far it seems to work best on a very small scale, when you can concentrate on how one or two dancers re-interpret the work of another choreographer.

Some startling ideas have come out of this in the past season. Ze'eva Cohen danced Rudy Perez' *Countdown* and Wendy Perron did William Dunas' *Gap,* providing new meaning for dances originally done by and for men. Carolyn Brown developed a "score" for a dance called

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Bunkered for a Bogey, in which she provides choreographic instructions in words and pictures, and the dancers collaborate in the creation of the work by making certain decisions that she leaves open to them. A young dancer named Marjorie Gamso has sent several friends fifteen Polaroid pictures of herself dancing, and has encouraged them to choreograph new dances based on the pictures.

All this is very positive, I think. Modern dancers as well trained as the current generation should have the chance to work with different choreographers and think about each other's ideas, and it's high time choreographers stopped hoarding their own works, refusing to let anyone else do them. But as the repertory idea has worked out in practice so far, the big works haven't been too successful stylistically. Not enough attention has been paid to the qualities and performing attitudes that made Limón's work look the way it did, or Graham's or Sokolow's. Companies that do a lot of repertory, like the Ailey or Utah's Repertory Dance Theater, have acquired an all-purpose, technically stunning and stylistically bland way of doing everything. Their reconstructions overdramatize the drama and leave the movement unfulfilled. The creators did it the other way around. Converting the classic modern dance repertory into staple, contemporary dance is not only unacceptable, it's a ripoff.

The other great breakthrough, and problem, of the modern dance's present era has been public financing. Dance, the least organized and institutionalized of all the arts, was the most vulnerable to bureaucratic pressures. Modern dance was the most vulnerable of all. As an art form it had no traditions, academic structures or supplementary sources of support to shield it from the appetites of the "public interest." In less than ten years, the modern dance field has transformed itself administratively from a disorderly, unpredictable mob to a set of convenient categories into which the appropriate applications could be sorted and processed, and the corresponding audience numbers applied. Dance is particularly difficult to fund on artistic grounds because there's so much of it, the variety is unimaginable, and the ways of evaluating it are so nebulous. You can hardly get two critics to agree on what a new choreographer is doing, let alone whether he or she is any good. So, government funding relies partly on extra-artistic formulas to arrive at the relative merits of art.

Much of the government subsidy to dance has been wisely apportioned. The granting agencies have been particularly foresighted, I think, in feeding the flow of new ideas by giving small amounts of money to young, experimental dancers. But there seems to be something inherent in the funding process that pulls it away from individuals and toward bigger corporate units. Dance has acquired, for the first time in this country, a class of professional middlemen.

Again, this has hit modern dance hardest. The big ballet companies

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for the most part have been privately founded and sustained, and have created such unassailably important images that their recent campaigns for public money have commandeered large chunks of the annual appropriation, placing a great strain on the amount that works its way down to the many small companies. In the places where the panels deliberate these things, a big proposal always gets more attention than a small one, a legislator with a thousand irate voters on the phone is a lot surer about which artist he'd better help or not help. So the impresarios of modern dance have played an increasing role as intermediaries in the funding apparatus, by developing markets for touring and by building multi-company "festivals" of high visibility and broad audience appeal. The typical modern dance package is so diverse that no one can complain of his interests being left out, and it's impossible to monitor the quality of any one component alone.

Modern dance has dreamed of being on Broadway for years, and it's always been understood that, apart from Martha Graham and one or two others, no single company would be strong enough to carry a whole season; they would have to join together. Somehow this got translated into the idea that *everybody* had to be on Broadway, and no one company could carry a whole evening's program. Was it the restless, parochial minds of the producers or the mythical, often invoked but never satisfied "public interest" that made this presumption? For many years the free dance concerts in New York's Central Park have offered a profusion of attractions on every program—in 1972 never less than three, sometimes six or more—thus insuring completely superficial exposure to everyone. But al fresco in the park and dance on Broadway are two different things.

In 1972 the City Center American Dance Marathon at the ANTA Theater, produced by Charles Reinhart, boasted "18 dance companies in six weeks—at least two companies on every program!" And the 1973 Jacobs Pillow festival was taking a "gang's all here" approach as it announced twenty-four names for its nine-week season. The Pillow, now directed by critic Walter Terry, who has succeeded its late founder, Ted Shawn, also created for me the perfect image of how utilitarian and undifferentiated dance has become in the minds of its entrepreneurs, by announcing that Margot Fonteyn would appear on its microscopic, summer-camp-rec-hall stage.

The sampler approach may indeed attract new audiences, but what it's selling is entertainment, not quality. In fact, some of the ANTA participants were of distinctly inferior quality, and the season was planned so that every night there would be a strong company to draw for a weaker one sharing the program. This not only short-changes the companies, it short-changes the audience. Though the ANTA Marathon spanned an extensive range of modern dance, the audience was given almost no help in locating what they were about to see in the thirty- or forty-year period, so every dance had to be looked at by itself.

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Historically important works and artists had to make it on the same terms as Alvin Ailey. Audiences tended to be partisan—well-known companies drew their own fans, black companies brought bussed-in groups—and for every piece you wanted to see, you had to sit through at least one you didn't. Some evenings the factions broke into open hostilities, and other times people just watched everything passively while munching on snacks and chatting with their neighbors. The marathon was an artistic and a financial disaster.

I think this sudden jump into prominence has hurt modern dance. The producers have chosen to underplay the form's strongest assets—its individuality and seriousness—and have encouraged audiences to view it superficially. The trashing of Merce Cunningham was the result.

Brooklyn Academy, to which we all looked only a few years ago as a real haven for modern dance, has discarded most of its idealistic plans about resident companies, decent length seasons, a really loyal audience, and has become mostly a booking house. Cunningham's was the last of several "resident" companies still connected with the Academy, and his 1972-73 "season" amounted to a big four performances. Four.

It was Cunningham's choice to do all four programs as Events, hour-and-a-half long sequences of dance, whole dances, parts of dances, in no particular order, with no intermission. This would have been hard on any kind of audience, but the crowds that filled the Academy were completely bewildered and turned off. When they saw they weren't going to get the entertainment bargain they had paid for, via subscription coupons (any ten events for a discount price), cheap student seats, or theater club blocks, they staged every kind of non-violent disturbance it's possible to make in a theater. One ex-Cunningham dancer, typically, remarked to me that at least it was a reaction to the dance.

I think this gives those audiences too much credit. They didn't understand enough about the dancing to be angry with it. Their reaction was contempt; just as everywhere else these days, they'd been sold a bill of goods, and by god they were going to retaliate. To me it was shocking to see one of the great artists of our time treated this way. Merce Cunningham, Joe Athlete, TV Susie, it's all the same—or so the promoters would have us believe.

Mass taste is not something that modern dance can satisfy. Now that the opportunity is beginning to present itself, some modern dancers are going to settle in the pop field, and some will be very effective there. But we must find ways to allow for exploration to go on, and in fact to be subsidized as fully as entertainment is. Public assistance to the arts has failed if it extorts compromises or imposes penalties on the creative artist.

The best modern dance has always been personal, even peculiar. In the history of Western dance, I think, it's the only scene where a whole

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approach to dancing can be built up from scratch by a single individual, and can, by the force of its language, make inroads on the great classical system. Martha Graham and Anna Sokolow would be remarkable for their contributions to ballet alone, but neither one of them ever tried to make modern ballets.

At the maniacal rate we are consuming everything, a choreographer has to be stubborn, even arrogant, to keep himself or herself outside the jaws of culturedom. Sokolow has, and, at fifty-eight, she continues to grow. Her *Three Poems,* choreographed in 1973 for the students at the Juilliard School, had the familiar Sokolow look of intense drama rising up out of basic movement, but she has become more sparing than ever with her materials. Time, space and gesture are condensed and crystallized—like some complex, beautiful stone you fish out of a California stream, the dance seems capable of enduring for thousands of years.

Cunningham has always stayed out. Now, having dispersed his own repertory into some seventy unrepeatable Events, he has dared to deactivate his company entirely until 1974, probably to gain time to rethink its direction. The enormous experimental dance field, which I haven't mentioned at all here, is Cunningham's progeny, though very little of it is engaged in pure dancing at the moment. Cunningham's own dancing and choreography are slightly but unmistakably becoming deeper and more personal.

The spirit of the old modern dance survives, through a blend of Cunningham and the most exacting classicism, in Twyla Tharp. Tharp is everything the old modern dancers were—individual, tough, far out, charismatic. Instead of allowing her work to merge and fade into some facile eclecticism, she has turned the ballet vocabulary to her own account. Tharp's steps and the virtuosity of her dancers may be balletic, but the compositional mind, the use of space and flow are hers alone. Amazingly—or perhaps not so amazingly, since she herself says that art isn't new, merely different—her work is inspired by familiar jazz music and dance styles, contemporary energies and humor. *Deuce Coupe,* to the songs of the Beach Boys, used the Joffrey Ballet dancers, Tharp's own company, and teenage kids off the streets, who drew graffiti right on the backdrop. Yet the ballet's sensational success can't have depended on its obvious aura of pop, since the Joffrey doles out pop almost every time it takes the curtain up. The success of *Deuce Coupe* was a popular success, but a modern dance victory. I hope the dance brokers were watching.

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MOIRA HODGSON

Ballet Chronicle

UNDAUNTED BY ALMOST DAILY DOWNPOURS, New Yorkers with British determination stood happily in line at the Met, packed the theaters at City Center and on Broadway, travelled all the way to Brooklyn, to the Village and to remote Soho lofts to experience this incredibly rich and exciting spring dance season. On a single night there were often four major companies to see and anxious critics worried over simultaneous premières.

The Joffrey ballet launched its City Center engagement this year with an ambitious program offering twenty-nine ballets in all, including three premières and several revivals. However, just when the company season was at its height, it was suddenly announced that funds were to be reduced by eighty percent, which would mean a cutback of the fall season and a question of whether a spring season would even be possible.

The hit of the season was Twyla Tharp's *Deuce Coupe*. In an unusual move for a ballet company the Joffrey joined forces with avant garde choreographer Twyla Tharp and her dancers to perform this ballet set to a selection of music by the Beach Boys over the last ten years. The idea of combining ballet and rock 'n' roll is not a novel one but Tharp's extraordinary handling of the music, her humor and her feeling for the sixties made this a very exciting ballet.

The ballet opens with a spotlight on Erika Goodman in a white tutu who carefully goes through the classical ballet vocabulary with all the seriousness of a young girl at the barre. Suddenly a footlights parade enters, boys in red shiny trousers and tropical shirts, girls in short orange dresses, each cut in a different style, and they slither nonchalantly across the stage in a series of hilarious postures. Oblivious, Goodman continues her ballet routine. The other dancers come in and out and whirl about her in a series of near-misses but like the dervishes miraculously manage to avoid touching her or each other.

At the same time, New York City's folk art is brought to the stage by high school kids dressed in the familiar blue jeans-and-sneakers uniform of the streets who spray graffiti on three large white panels which slowly move upwards until they are covered. The graffiti, which was different every night, was strangely beautiful (as it often is on the subways) in its bright, often menacing, often humorous way.

Tharp brings back the crowded dance floors of the sixties, the wriggling mass of shimmying, slouching bodies, shrugging shoulders and swaying hips never lets up for a minute and all the dancers compete with set, serious faces. At the end Tharp does a phrase of Goodman's and Goodman does a loose little imitation of Tharp as if to

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say, "There, it's not so different after all." The same little steps, the same self-preoccupation.

The other outstanding ballet of the Joffrey season was *Parade,* a revival of the "first Cubist ballet" which was performed in May 1917 with the incredible collaboration of Picasso, Cocteau, Satie and Massine. It was Cocteau's idea to do a ballet based on the lives of circus people. Originally he had intended to do a ballet called *David.* "An acrobat would do his pitch for *David,* the big show supposedly presented inside; a clown, who would then become a box, the theatrical equivalent of the fair phonograph, the modern version of the ancient mask, would sing through a megaphone of the prowess of David and entreat the public to enter and see the show inside."[1]

David as such never got written but became *Parade.* It takes place outside a travelling theater where three music hall turns, a horse and two managers, try to induce the public to come inside and watch the show. The original horse had a large Cubist manager on its back but it kept falling off and making the audience laugh so Picasso had it removed.

Parade marked Picasso's debut in stage design. In the spring of 1916 Diaghilev was taken by a mutual friend to Picasso's studio and shortly afterwards commissioned him to do a *mise en scène.* The front curtain is a delicate naturalistic portrait of circus figures relaxing around a table. It is raised to reveal a Cubist backdrop and two Cubist managers outside a tent, one with a skyscraper on his back and the other in evening dress with trees on his back. Even the horse has a Cubist head.

Satie's music is punctuated by Cocteau's sound effects which the latter describes as *trompe d'oreille.* He introduced the sound of typewriters, revolver shots, "squishy puddles," airplane engines into the score. In 1923 Satie wrote to Diaghilev: "I don't much care for Jean's noises. But about that there's nothing to be done. We are dealing with a lovable maniac." Cocteau even wanted barker's cries but Diaghilev drew the line at this point. Cocteau apparently had hoped for a *succès de scandale* such as the *Rite of Spring* had produced in Paris. But the audience dismissed the ballet as trivial and irritating (although it was praised by intellectuals).

The Joffrey has its own choreographer, Gerald Arpino, and he is at his best and most agreeable when he is most clearly influenced by Balanchine. I enjoy the speed, pacing and patterns of short, storyless ballets such as *Kettentanz, Reflections* and *Chabriesque.* However, when he turns to ballets with a message, he gets into trouble. *Sacred Grove on Mount Tamalpais* is to ballet what Rod McKuen is to poetry. *Trinity* is not much better. Both ballets are sentimental and self conscious.

Alvin Ailey followed the Joffrey to City Center for a four-week engagement with an audience that jostled in every night like a subway crowd and there were encores and applause so loud that the balcony

[1] Jean Cocteau; *Le Coq et l'Arlequin.*

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was nearly brought down. Ailey has a strong theatrical style and combines classical ballet steps with jazz, ethnic and modern dance. He owes a large debt to Martha Graham (as anyone who saw her company this season could tell). He is also lucky in that he has five outstanding dancers: Judith Jamison, Mari Kajiwara, Sara Yarborough, Dudley Williams and John Parks. The company has never looked better than it did this year. It is always exciting to see dancers (such as Hector Mercado) become first-rate and Ailey is obviously very clever at bringing out the best in them—particularly those with unusual bodies like John Parks and Judith Jamison.

Ailey's *Flowers* made sense for me for the first time when I saw it danced this season by Sara Yarborough. Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* shows Ailey's male dancers at their best. The ensemble work was superb and Hector Mercado was particularly good, as were both Sara Yarborough and Mari Kajiwara alternating in the role of the Dream. Leon Bibb sang beautifully to Leon Atkinson's guitar but the spell was broken when the dancers opened their mouths onstage. The essential distance between observer and performer was lost.

Revelations is, of course, Ailey's best work and the most completely successful, from the beginning where the company, the girls in long brown shifts and boys in brown trousers, perform the "I Been Buked" section, to the brilliant "Wading in the Water" scene with its stunning effect of the sheets swirled across the stage, to Dudley Williams' expressive solo in "I Want to Be Ready," a dazzling Hector Mercado in "Sinner Man" and the final wrap-up with the cast in the exuberant "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham."

The Kinetic Molpai, originally choreographed by Ted Shawn in 1935 for his troupe of men, was for me one of the most fascinating ballets of the season. Shawn in the thirties was trying to give some meaning to male dancing and give men more to do than merely lift girls. The ballet opens with John Parks alone on stage making musclebound movements with his chest until he is joined by eight other men, all barechested and dressed in brown trousers who dance with clenched fists. I had a vision of those thirties friezes of heroic workers carved in stone. Jess Meeker's piano music was straight out of Kurt Jooss and a bit thumpy at first but then the ballet took off and it showed the men to perfection. The steps were classical from *rond de jambes to tant de cuisses,* wonderful *grand jetés en* tournant and only the arms seemed to veer from the pure classical style. There were inside jokes as the boys performed bravura classroom combinations and even did *piqué* turns and *fouettés* normally reserved for girls, with incredible skill.

Rudolf Nureyev was back again at the Met, this time with the National Ballet of Canada, and once more he showed us what a unique dancer he is. It isn't only his thrilling leaps and his incredible turns that make Nureyev probably the best dancer in the world. You can see how good he is when he dances simply and unaffectedly with the corps

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and in his sensitive generous partnering of the new young Canadian ballerinas in their debut at the Met.

Nureyev's *Sleeping Beauty,* with his additional choreography after Petipa, was a stunning production with lavish sets and costumes by Nicholas Georgiadis. The opening scene was the most magnificent. Georgiadis had created a grand gloomy baroque castle with an immense staircase in rich muted colors, old gold and bronze. When the princess pricks her finger and the courtiers, dressed in beautiful seventeenth-century costumes, fall asleep, huge thorny briars descend one after the other in a thick curtain.

Nureyev's feeling for Petipa and for the Russian tradition was shown in his admirable handling of the cast. He understands the bold expansive style of Petipa. His additional choreography, of course, gives him, as the Prince, more to do, including three variations in Act II. He makes the Lilac Fairy a mime role, dressing her so heavily that she can't dance but moves around like a doll on wheels. The wicked Carabosse is played by a woman, also heavily dressed.

He uses the grand staircase to marvellous effect having the courtiers faint all at once into a deep sleep over the banisters and up the steps. When the Prince arrives (after a magnificently theatrical boat trip through the misty forest with the Lilac Fairy) he enters the palace at the top of the stairs. The stage is dark except for a light at the top which follows him as he wanders down, as though into a cellar, among the covered courtiers.

Karen Kain was a radiant Aurora. She has lovely arabesques, beautiful timing and handled the difficult fish dives with ease. Veronica Tennant was expressive and musical in the role (she has remarkable balance too) but she seemed to have no real contact with Nureyev.

With Nureyev dancing the lead in every performance there was not much chance for the other men to be seen. But Frank Augustyn, who replaced him as the Prince in Sunday matinees, was a superb Bluebird in that difficult pas de deux (skilfully partnered by Mary Jago) and I particularly enjoyed Winthrop Corey's witty performance as one of Aurora's foppish suitors.

Erik Bruhn's *Swan Lake* was a disappointing production. He turns the ballet into a Freudian drama with the Prince as victim of the women in his life. He has a mother who is a rather bourgeois lady and all she wants is for him to get married. Then he meets this swan and she too has a mother of sorts, the Black Queen who has bewitched her. Together they make quite a team and the prince simply can't handle it. He is finally done in by the infuriated swans who attack him for betraying their queen at the ball. He jumps into the scenery and the Swan Queen remains sadly behind—no double suicide for her, she's got to find another prince now—as he drowns. It was a nice idea but it didn't come off and the end seemed even sillier in retrospect after I had seen Cranko's sensitive production.

There were tender and gentle moments in the ballet and Karen Kain

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was a wonderful vaporous Odette (Vanessa Harwood was also lovely in the role) but the production lacked fire.

The corps was good, but the patterns in the white scene had been changed. Gone were the wonderful Petipa lines and instead there was a confusion of bunched up little groups. The choreography in the ballroom scene at the end of Act II was also very messy. Bruhn introduced some pointless clowns and the Neapolitan, valiantly danced by Frank Augustyn and Veronica Tennant, was so fast that they could barely get their feet around the steps.

Where Bruhn is most at home is with Bournonville. He was raised in the tradition and clearly understands it. *La Sylphide,* first produced in 1836, had always been a favorite of the Danish ballet and Bruhn himself has danced the role of James throughout his career. His choreography was superb, he captured the wit and humor of the ballet, the vigor of the Scottish dances and the pathos of the pas de deux with James and the Sylph. The ballet was skillfully and gracefully danced by the Canadians. Veronica Tennant and Nadia Potts were agreeable and charming alternate sylphs and Jacques Morisson was magnificantly horrible as Madge the Witch.

The Stuttgart Ballet opened at the Met the following week with three full-length ballets and three short works. All were choreographed by the late John Cranko, who went to Stuttgart from England in the early sixties, and given free reign was able to pull together, in no time at all, one of the world's best dance companies. He was one of the greatest dramatic choreographers of our time and his death on return from a brilliant New York season is deeply mourned. He knew how to create a high point, or a tension, and when to let the audience rest before building up the drama again. He was a clever artistic man with a feeling for timing, detail and an interest in history and literature which shows itself in his great full length ballets, *Romeo and Juliet, Eugene Onegin* and *Swan Lake.* To add to that he assembled a company of disciplined dancers who dance not only with precision but with feeling and without strain. His principals, the dramatic ballerina Marcia Haydée, Richard Cragun and Egon Madsen in particular, are oustanding.

The season opened with *Romeo and Juliet* which Cranko choreographed in 1962. Marcia Haydée danced Juliet to Richard Cranko's Romeo on the opening night. Later I saw the young dancer Joyce Cuoco in the role and I liked her better. Haydée's personality does not fit the part and she wasn't able to capture the youthful freshness and exuberance of Juliet and show her transformation from a child into a young woman. Age has nothing to do with it—Fonteyn is an enchanting Juliet—but Haydée is too serious and comes out much better in a ballet like *Eugene Onegin* or *Traces.* Cuoco was an ebullient, joyful, innocent Juliet. She has a brilliant way of staying suspended on point in arabesque for just a little bit longer, and wonderful *grand jetés* which she does in splits which seem to stay hung in mid-air. I saw

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Cragun and Madsen alternate as Mercutio and Romeo. I preferred Madsen as Romeo. Dancing with verve and brilliance he also managed to look young and vulnerable with that tenderness and shy desire of a young boy first in love. He and Cuoco made a convincing pair. Cragun looks too mature, I preferred him as a gay, teasing Mercutio who danced with dazzling lightness and speed. Madsen was also a brilliant witty Mercuito, making it hard to choose between them.

Cranko's genius for making steps speak for themselves is dramatically evident in the balcony scene. The shy young lovers don't know what to say to one another and Romeo shows his passion with turns and *grand jetés, rond de jambes en l'air* which he finishes on one knee with outstretched arms.

The production was sumptuous. Jürgen Rose's costumes and sets were extraordinarily beautiful and very Italian with a market place backdrop reminiscent of Canaletto. The effect of the black, silver, copper and gold costumes in the Capulet ballroom scene was dazzling, with Juliet standing out in a filmy white dress and flame cloak and the three Montagu intruders flamboyant in gold masks and scarlet cloaks.

Eugene Onegin was as successful here as it was in Russia on a recent tour. They have no ballet version of the poem and the music, although by Tschaikovsky, is not from the opera but from lesser known compositions, including his compositions for piano.

Haydée was perfect as Tatiana and the night I saw it Heinz Clauss made an excellent cool and haughty Onegin. Haydée built the character from the start, from a young infatuated bookish girl to the final scene where, as a sad and mature woman, she sends away the desperate Onegin. The bedroom scene where she writes Onegin the passionate love letter was one of the most powerful moments of the ballet. As she dreams into the mirror he steps out from behind her reflection and there is a dramatic build up of emotion as they dance a bold and brilliant pas de deux, with difficult lifts and turns in the lifts.

Cranko's *Swan Lake,* first performed last year, was daring and innovative. But unlike my frustration with Erik Bruhn's version of the ballet, I liked the changes. What he has done is to make the ballet make more sense without destroying the good things about the old version. He cut the waltzes and pas de trois from Act I and replaced them with a beautiful pas de six performed by Richard Cragun (as the Prince) and five girls. In the fourth act he replaces the Drigo pas de deux with an Elegy for Strings which is longer and gives them more to do. Cranko also adds a wonderful touch in the beginning having the ambassadors from different countries arrive with portraits of prospective brides which are unveiled, to the boredom of the Prince. Later, these princesses perform the *divertissements* as national dances so that they have a place in the ballet. Cranko says, ". . . all the musical repetitions have been cut and the drama has been strengthened accordingly so that the prince emerges as a living person who experiences a tragic ordeal rather than a human crane who simply lifts the ballerina."

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Cragun's highly original interpretation of the role of the Prince made the role entirely his own and his dancing was splendid.

Birgit Keil was a lovely shy swan, with a careful reticent approach and a clean line. However, her character change, when she appears as Odile in Act II, wasn't strong enough. She showed no hardness but merely smiled a lot and she seemed afraid to let go. The character change is especially important to Cranko's ballet where the prince's crime is to have allowed himself to be misled by outer appearances.

Jürgen Rose's sets and costumes were lovely, especially the gold throne room with the bright slash of orange staircase in the middle and the lakeside scene where, at the end, in a violent storm the scenery comes crashing down and the prince drowns in a billowing sea.

Traces, a new short ballet, shows Cranko's dramatic ability as its best. Set to the adagio from Mahler's Tenth Symphony it is the story of a woman escaped from a concentration camp struggling to forget the horrors of her past and the death of her husband. Against backdrops painted to suggest barbed wire, a man and a woman arrive at a party, beautiful dancing couples glide gracefully by and the woman, Marcia Haydée, holds out her hands to them. Suddenly through the backcloth we have a vision of her past husband (Richard Cragun) in a concentration camp. More bodies become visible and the backdrop is raised to reveal them lying on the floor, gray shapes with shaved heads who slowly raise an arm, sit up and cover their faces.

There is marvellous contrast in the thick despairing movements of the prisoners and the light, airy dancing of the party people. As the ballet progresses we go deeper and deeper into the past with the raising of the backdrop each time until we are as far back as the stage allows. Neon lights are shone on the prisoners who remove their cloaks to reveal bare tattooed backs just as the music reaches a high pitch, and they fall.

Marcia Haydée, Richard Cragun and Heinz Clauss (as the present husband) were magnificent. They danced a difficult pas de trois fraught with heart-rending details such as Haydée with her head down turning her extended foot in and out on the floor in a meticulous expression of grief for her dead husband. At the end all the prisoners and her past husband fade away and her present husband helps her on with her coat and they walk upstage into a vague, uncertain sun.

Initials RBME, was choreographed by Cranko "for four friends, Richard, Birgit, Marcia and Egon" to the music of Brahms (Piano Concerto No 2, Opus 25). In this piece he gives the four dancers things they can do best. He emphasizes Cragun's control, his ability to slow down after fast turns, stopping a pirouette in a perfect arabesque; Keil's supple long arms, her fluidity and ease in difficult jumps; Haydée's sad, dramatic eloquence, and Madsen's quick brilliant impish style. The

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lovely sets by Jürgen Rose, in muted colors with a different wash for each set, reminded me of Hans Hofmann.

New York City Ballet was back at Lincoln Center for a two month season which was to be the last for Melissa Hayden, who has danced with the company for nearly twenty-five years. Two new ballets were on the program, *Cortège Hongrois,* a farewell tribute to Hayden choreographed by Balanchine, and *An Evening's Waltzes* by Jerome Robbins. The high points of the repertoire were *Stravinsky Violin Concerto, Concerto Barocco, Agon, Apollo* and *Jewels.* Unfortunately space does not permit me to discuss these ballets in detail this time. The failures were *Swan Lake* (in which the corps looked unrehearsed) and *Firebird,* from which the dancing had been cut so that the ballet was no more than an excuse to bring down the Chagall backdrops.

Melissa Hayden, who had joined the company in 1949, annouced her retirement shortly after the season began. In front of a cheering standing audience at the annual gala she was given the medal of the city by John Lindsay as "extraordinary ballerina who has filled the hearts of her audiences with joy." It was a sad occasion.

Hayden was lovely in her last season. She was particularly good in *Concerto Barocco,* soft, melting and lyrical to that wonderful music by Bach (the Violin Concerto in D Minor). She was not only strong and controlled but she was obviously moved by the music and enjoying herself. She showed off her lovely extension in double turns which ended in a developpé in second which she held firmly and triumphantly. Partnered by Helgi Tomasson in *Stars and Stripes* she turns slowly as he holds her hand keeping that extension perfectly balanced in second. In this ballet she shows her witty and comic side whereas in *Jewels,* dancing with Francisco Moncion in the Emeralds section, she becomes the beautiful romantic ballerina. I also saw her with Peter Martins in *In the Night* where she managed those sadistic upside-down lifts with ease and determination.

Cortège Hongrois is the last act of *Raymonda* done over again. This time Balanchine has stuck closely to Petipa's choreography. Set to the music of Alexander Glazounov, the ballet consists of the Hungarian divertissements from the last act of *Raymonda* and the Grande Valse from Act 1. There are two processions, one in national costume led by Karen von Aroldingen and Jean Pierre Bonnefous (whose sharp, frenzied style is suited to the pace of the czardas) and another in classical ballet clothes led by Melissa Hayden and Jacques d'Amboise. The white and green costumes by Rouben Ter-Arutunian were not particularly exciting and at one performance bits kept flying off to the distress of the dancers. Karen von Aroldingen was extraordinary in the czardas, throwing herself into it with vigor and falling back in those familiar and always effective backbends. Hayden was a little uncertain in her role and Jacques d'Amboise was a well-meaning but weak and unexciting partner. Later, because of a knee injury, he was replaced by John Clifford who gives the part the dash and brilliance it needs, and Hayden was correspondingly richer in her performance with him.

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STEPHEN FARBER

Last Tango

SOMETIMES TOO MUCH PUBLICITY can hurt a movie more than too little. By the time I saw *Last Tango in Paris* in March, I had read Pauline Kael's famous rave review (possibly the most influential single review in the history of the art), cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek,* interviews with director Bernardo Bertolucci and actress Maria Schneider, and a whole series of contradictory reviews. How could anyone have approached the film openly after this media blitz? There wasn't a scene in the movie that hadn't been described in one place or another; *Last Tango* had no secrets left.

After the big buildup, the film was bound to be disappointing—but I could not have guessed how thoroughly disappointing. The *Tango* I had imagined for months was infinitely more exciting than the muddled, impotent *Tango* on screen. I don't think I am alone in wanting to see a great sex movie—a movie that would be truly erotic and, at the same time, meaningful and illuminating. In her review of *Last Tango,* Pauline Kael had promised: "The movie breakthrough has finally come. . . . This must be the most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it may turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made. . . . Bertolucci and Brando have altered the face of an art form."

Bertolucci and Brando are indeed major talents; that's why the failure of *Last Tango in Paris* is so depressing. The film represents no breakthrough of any kind—least of all in the area of sex. What could Pauline Kael have seen? The sex is not erotic, exotic, startling or innovative. It's obviously simulated (much of it performed with the actors fully clothed)—which wouldn't be troublesome if it were imaginative. But it has no impact of any kind. According to Kael, Brando's "first sex act has a boldness that had the audience gasping. . . ." Californians may be more decadent than New Yorkers, but when I saw the movie, no one gasped; I think more people would have laughed if the film hadn't already become a major High Culture event. After circling her in an empty apartment, Brando pins Maria Schneider against a wall, and pretty soon both of them are panting and grunting and moaning as their bodies twitch in uncontrollable spasms; after a quick but perfect orgasm, they fall to the floor, exhausted. Their reactions are so much more extreme than anything we've *seen* could begin to warrant that the encounter plays more like a parody of passion than the real thing.

Last Tango isn't graphic enough to be compared with porno movies, and it isn't as erotic as a number of commercial movies already in release. Everything in *Tango* has been seen before. The standing-up,

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whirling-around sex scene in *Five Easy Pieces* is more startling than the opening scene in *Tango*—and more pertinent to the characterizations. The rape scene in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* is more erotic and disturbing than any scene of sexual brutalization in *Tango,* and the sex scenes in Ken Russell's movies—both *Women in Love* and *The Music Lovers*—are more highly charged, more shocking and convincing. Those filmmakers understand how to build erotic tension. Bertolucci's scenes are at once more clinical and more evasive—curiously dispassionate.

If the images in *Last Tango* are a letdown, the ideas about sex are even more soporific. The film is built around a sexual experiment: Paul, a middle-aged man shattered by the suicide of his wife, meets Jeanne, a young girl, and tries to establish a relationship based entirely on sex. In the apartment where they meet, they have no names, and everything in their outside lives is forgotten, obliterated. In searching for sex without any ties, without "love" or affection, Paul hopes to defy society's attempts to domesticate sexual desire. Paul and Jeanne want to find the truth of direct experience; they plan to follow their impulses wherever they lead. It is an intriguing point of departure, but Bertolucci doesn't have the vision to take this experiment to a provacative conclusion. His only conclusion—thoroughly predictable—is that the lovers cannot escape their cultural conditioning. They establish a conventional male-dominated sexual relationship, and before long each falls in love with the other, though not at precisely the same moment. Perhaps the freedom they are seeking is an illusion; it may be that "pure" sex dissociated from the idea of commitment is impossible or even dangerous. But Bertolucci never seriously examines the possibilities. There's nothing dangerous about *Last Tango in Paris.* Bertolucci is as trapped by cultural conventions as his characters. He does not know how to make the woman an equal partner in the experiment; she's no more than a victim, a slave, and she doesn't make any sexual demands that might have upset the traditional male-female roles.

In the end *Last Tango* says that sex without love is destructive. That's why the film has been acclaimed by so many major news magazines and moralistic critics. Cammell and Roeg's *Performance,* released three years ago, didn't make the cover of *Time* because it represented a much more basic and profound challenge to sexual hypocrisy. It said everything that *Tango* tries to say about the connection between violence and wounded masculinity, and went on to explode the conception of sexuality formulated by Judeo-Christian culture. A visionary study of sexual role-playing and the blurring of sexual distinctions, *Performance* was too painful and disorienting to be embraced by the culture vultures; it remains the most important, revolutionary movie about sex that I know. *Last Tango in Paris,* which indirectly affirms the values of our patriarchal, guilt-ridden society, can be more easily absorbed by a middlebrow audience.

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The sexual evasiveness of *Last Tango* is only the first of its failures. Bertolucci toys with a number of potentially provocative themes—a middle-aged man's desperate search for renewal, the irreconcilable conflict of eros and civilization, the durability of the bourgeois family, the limitations of romanticism, the distinctions between art and life—without bringing any of them into focus. One keeps trying to figure out how a particular scene fits into the overall structure; but there is no structure, just a mess of half-baked, sophomoric, often contradictory ideas. Bertolucci has never made a fully controlled movie; he seems suspicious of clarity and intellectual discipline, and he relies on "intuition." *Tango* represents the risks of that instinctive approach.

Many of the confusions in the film can probably be traced to Marlon Brando's important role in the production. Not many movies have been so dominated by the personality of the leading actor. Because Bertolucci doesn't know English, he must have allowed Brando an unusual amount of control over the content of individual scenes, and over the direction of the entire film. Bertolucci has admitted that much of the film was improvised, and although Brando is always exciting to watch, his influence throws everything off balance. *Last Tango in Paris* exemplifies the dangers of improvisation in films; it *is* an important touchstone—not because of any artistic breakthrough, but because it embodies a significant, virulent trend in contemporary movie-making, a conviction that the only moments of truth are the moments that aren't planned. This new aesthetic based on improvisation recalls the Romantic exaltation of spontaneity and inspiration.

Norman Mailer, in his fascinating review of *Last Tango* (*New York Review of Books,* May 17, 1973), complained that the film did not go far enough with improvisation: "Improvisation which is anything less than the whole of a film is next to no improvisation. . . . One does not add improvisation to a script which is already written and with an ending that is locked up. . . . It reduces improvisation to a free play period in the middle of a strict curriculum." Although I am dubious about the idea of total improvisation that Mailer champions, I can see the logic of his argument: *Last Tango's* mixture of artifice and improvisation is bound to be self-defeating. The film doesn't have the poetic truth of good fiction, and it doesn't have the documentary truth—the accidental revelations—that we *might* get from a wholly improvised movie. It falls somewhere in between, and that's nowhere.

The contrived structure prevents the possibility of surprise; but more important, the reliance on improvisation muddies what could have been a unified *artistic* vision. Brando has a number of monologues in *Tango* which can't have been written or planned; one of these—a long monologue about his childhood on a farm—has been highly praised, and it is technically impressive, but at the same time wholly gratuitous. It may be titillating to movie magazine fans or sociologists interested in Marlon Brando's childhood—for it seems at

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least partly autobiographical—but it is irrelevant to the character of Paul, and therefore an irritating distraction. At times the film seems to have been conceived as psychodrama for Brando, and Bertolucci has the mistaken idea that his star's self-analysis will be enlightening for the rest of us. Pauline Kael may believe that the future of the movies is in this kind of improvisation. She calls it "realism with the terror of actual experience still alive on the screen." But there is no "actual experience" on screen. Kael has strange theories on the nature of the medium; her love of movie stars—and her idolatry of Brando in particular—have led her to make the biggest blunder of her critical career.

I don't like absolute formal rules, but it seems clear to me that film is not an actor's medium. The director must be in control. And that means control of all the resources of film—camera movement, editing and design, and dialogue too. Actors don't write very good dialogue, but in some of the most dramatic moments of *Tango* Bertolucci depends on Brando's purple prose. In one of the crucial exchanges in the film Brando's Paul expounds on the subject of loneliness: "You're all alone, and you won't be able to get rid of that feeling of being alone until you can look death right in the face, go up into the ass of death, into the womb of fear." Can this be straight? At the moments of the film where we need a lucid, controlled *visual* statement, we have to settle for some embarrassingly bad lines invented by the star.

Bertolucci tries to conceal his own bewilderment by relying on his familiar ornate style—heightening the orange glow of late afternoon sunlight, shooting through broken mirrors and frosted glass, bringing up the lush Gato Barbieri score for lyrical effect. The movie doesn't really have style, just exaggerated stylistic mannerisms, and it plays almost like self-parody. All the extravagant, breathless lyrical flourishes represent a desperate search for direction or purpose. The first time Bertolucci zooms in on an orange corner and floods the soundtrack with his *Tango* theme song, it's impressive; by the fifth time it's laughable.

The stylistic gimmickry may be the most disappointing aspect of *Last Tango*—even more disappointing than the awkardly simulated sex scenes; for in *The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist,* Bertolucci seemed to be one of the few contemporary directors experimenting with film syntax, testing some of the unique qualities of the medium. In both films Bertolucci blurred the line between memory, fantasy, and reality in order to convey a character's state of mind. *The Spider's Stratagem* concerns a man trying to find out the truth about his father in the town where he was born, traveling into the past—or a dream of the past—in an intense, ambivalent oedipal struggle. The climactic sequence, in which past and present finally merge as the hero imaginatively participates in his father's murder, is achieved through a masterly control of film technique. *The Conformist* contains subtler distortions of reality as it contrasts the protagonist's rigid Fascist political identity to the bizarre romance of his fantasy life. Both films

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utilized a subjective style to suggest something about the ambiguity of human motives, the difficulty of arriving at the truth about personal and social history. Bertolucci's romanticism found perfect expression in these oblique studies of seduction and enchantment.

In *Last Tango* Bertolucci may be trying to qualify and transcend that romanticism. The only way to understand some strained scenes between Jeanne and her fiance Tom, a young filmmaker (Jean-Pierre Leaud), is to see them as Bertolucci's ironic comment on the limitations of his own romantic style, an acknowledgment of the basic lie of movie romance. At one point Tom dances in the rain, screaming to Jeanne, "You are better than Joan Crawford, you are better than Rita Hayworth, you are better than Kim Novak. . . ." The harsher scenes between Paul and Jeanne in their apartment underscore the essential immaturity of Tom's romantic visions; Bertolucci wants to contrast the extravagant lies of romantic art to the truth of a brutally unromantic sexual encounter. The problem is that Bertolucci romanticizes the sexual relationship too. That's why the orange glow and the mellow score seem so inappropriate; the lyrical style fatally confounds the film's themes.

The whole pattern of the Paul-Jeanne relationship is a romantic cliche—from the violent first meeting, to their falling hopelessly in love, to the baroque melodramatic ending, the love death. For all the panting and the thrusting, the sodomy-with-butter, theirs is a movie love affair, a celebration of the romance of chance encounter. As their relationship develops, there's no real tension or anguish that might blast the idea of cotton candy romance parodied in the scenes with Tom. The relationship of Paul and Jeanne promises to be a Lawrentian battle for supremacy, but it never generates that kind of electricity. The scenes between Richard Harris and Rachel Roberts in *This Sporting Life,* although less explicit in detail, had a savagery that *Tango* never matches. Or one can compare *Last Tango* to Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers,* another film that plays romantic cliche against harsh sexual realities. The scene in which Glenda Jackson assaults Richard Chamberlain conveys a more powerful sense of animal hunger than anything in Bertolucci's movie.

The sexual relationship in *Tango* seems to be based on a middle-aged male fantasy—the idea that a man of forty-five or fifty can hypnotize a frisky girl of twenty and turn her into a slave, a drooling Barbie doll. Jeanne's reactions to Paul's sexual power are never believable. In the most foolish scene, he asks her to stick her fingers up his anus, and she seems to have an orgasm as she feels his swollen prostate; she must have the most erotically sensitized fingertips imaginable. Jeanne has no sexual desires independent of Paul; she is a willing victim. The only time she asserts herself is when she finally kills him. This ending is meant to give the film its significance, but since there isn't any emotional violence in their relationship, the tragic conclusion seems completely arbitrary.

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This unconvincing ending is the clearest sign of the film's lack of control. The key dramatic moments in the film all seem false, for the motivations of the characters are obscure. It isn't convincing when Jeanne suddenly declares her love for Paul, and it isn't any more convincing when she decides she never wants to see him again. Her change of heart is presumably crystallized in a scene with her fiance, who tells her sternly, "We can't joke like this, like children. We're adults." That moment is heavily underlined, but how can we take Tom seriously after laughing at him throughout the movie? We can't accept any of the characters' reckless decisions, and even worse, we can't tell what these decisions are supposed to signify. In a recent interview (*Rolling Stone,* June 21, 1973) Bertolucci was asked whether Paul has "given in to the 'conventional' idea of love or whether he's in fact become more 'human' " when he pursues Jeanne outside their apartment. Bertolucci answered: "I don't know if he really becomes more human or more stupid. . ." He went on: "Why does [Jeanne] kill him? Is it that she's too bourgeois? Or that she's better than he is and doesn't want to accept his new conventionality?" And he seemed proud of the fact that he didn't know the answers. Ambiguity can be fruitful in art, but only if we feel the artist has some idea of which alternative is more likely. One watches *Last Tango* in exasperation, because the ambiguities aren't controlled. Pauline Kael praises the film for being unresolved, but it's worse than unresolved—it's unformulated, inexpressive, meaningless.

I have overstated the case against *Tango.* Had it opened without publicity, I probably would have described it as an interesting failure. For there are some good things in the movie. Maria Schneider has an appealing impish quality, and Brando has many powerful moments —especially the scene of his breakdown over his wife's body. The stylized sequence of the tango contest, to take just one example, is visually stunning—an example of Bertolucci's virtuosity. Best of all is the scatological language, which turns out to be far more daring than the rather chaste visuals. The last verbal restraints truly have been shattered; the best moments of the film have something of Henry Miller's raucous vulgarity. The boyish relish with which Brando spits out the obscenities is exhilarating. The earthy comedy of *Last Tango* represents the positive results of improvisation—for Bertolucci, an Italian, could not have written the idiomatic, vulgar dialogue that Brando delivers with such charm and ease. However, if improvisation has its rewards, the rewards are distinctly minor in the context of an ambitious venture like *Last Tango.* The occasional felicities can hardly make up for the overwhelming sense of emptiness and waste. *Last Tango in Paris* is a cultural milestone, and I hope that its commercial success will encourage more meaningful and adventurous studies of sexual relationships. Considered as a work of art, its importance is minimal.

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Reviews

MARVIN MUDRICK

Old Pros with News from Nowhere[1]

DO MONSTERS EVER TAKE A BREAK for toast and tea? One of fiction's consummate monsters is the nurse, midwife, and layer-out-of-corpses in *Martin Chuzzlewit,* Mrs. Gamp, for whom Dickens invented a dialect and a professional manner so uninterruptedly expressive as to seal her off like a true monster from every outward influence; yet, once she settles herself in the sickroom for a long night, the impression she makes isn't unique or monstrous, rather it's typical and domestic, as if in her need and relish for comfort she were just like the rest of us:

> She now proceeded to unpack her bundle; lighted a candle with the aid of a fire-box on the drawers; filled a small kettle, as a preliminary to refreshing herself with a cup of tea in the course of the night; laid what she called "a little bit of fire," for the same philanthropic purpose; and also set forth a small tea-board, that nothing might be wanting for her comfortable enjoyment. These preparations occupied so long, that when they were brought to a conclusion it was high time to think about supper, so she rang the bell and ordered it.

That zone of quiet doesn't interest some of our best-known writers nowadays, who in their so-called comic novels invent monsters merely as laboriously disagreeable as themselves:

> I have conquered insomnia many a night reciting . . . [from the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*] to myself, aloud if I happened to be alone, under my breath (as was the better part of wisdom) if some

[1] THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL, by *Philip Roth.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston. $8.95. BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS, by *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Delacorte. $7.95. AMERICAN MISCHIEF, by *Alan Lelchuk.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $8.95. STRANGE PEACHES, by *Edwin Shrake.* Harper's Magazine Press. $7.95. RECOVERY, by *John Berryman.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $6.95. CATHOLICS, by *Brian Moore.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston. $4.95. BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH, by *Nathalie Sarraute.* Translated by *Maria Jolas. Braziller.* $5.00. DO YOU HEAR THEM? By *Nathalie Sarraute.* Translated by *Maria Jolas.* Braziller. $5.95. FORGETTING ELENA, by *Edmund White.* Random House. $5.95. JUST SHEAFFER OR STORMS IN THE TROUBLED HEIR, by *Ian Mowatt.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $5.95. GIRLS AT WAR AND OTHER STORIES, by *Chinua Achebe.* Doubleday. $5.95. THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK, by *Doris Lessing.* Knopf. $6.95. LIFE SIGNS, by *Johanna Davis.* Atheneum. $5.95. YOURS, AND MINE, by *Judith Rascoe.* Atlantic Monthly Press. $6.95. THE WORLD OF APPLES, by *John Cheever.* Knopf. $5.95. REMBRANDT'S HAT, by *Bernard Malamud.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $6.95. A RUSSIAN BEAUTY AND OTHER STORIES, by *Vladimir Nabokov.* McGraw-Hill. $7.95.

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slit was snoring beside me. Only imagine one of them bimbos overhearing Smitty whaning-that-Aprille in the middle of the night! Waking to find herself in the dark with a guy who sounds five hundred years old! Especially if she happened to think of herself as "particular"! Why, say to one of those slits—in the original accent—"The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote," and she'd kick you right in the keester. "There are some things a girl won't do, Mr. Word Smith, not even for dough! Good*bye*!" On the other hand, to do women justice, there is one I remember, a compassionate femme with knockers to match, who if you said to her, "So priketh hem nature in hir corages," she'd tell you, "Sure I blow guys in garages. They're human too, you know."

But this is not a book about tough cunts. Nat Hawthorne wrote that one long ago. . . .

Word Smith—yes, that's his name, the initials coincident (as he informs us) with Shakespeare's—stands out there swinging those pudgy allusions from the word go: "Call me Smitty" is the first sentence of *The Great American Novel.* As for the opening of *Breakfast of Champions:* "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast"; so fast, indeed, that nobody has time for Mrs. Gamp's or the human race's petty contentments, though there's always time for lots of laughs on the scratchy soundtrack:

When Kilgore Trout accepted the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1979, he declared: . . .

"There were two monsters sharing this planet with us when I was a boy . . . and I celebrate their extinction today. They were determined to kill us, or at least to make our lives meaningless. They came close to success. They were cruel adversaries, which my little friends the beavers were not. Lions? No. Tigers? No. Lions and tigers snoozed most of the time. The monsters I will name never snoozed. They inhabited our heads. They were the arbitrary lusts for gold, and, God help us, for a glimpse of a little girl's underpants. . . ."

Breakfast of Champions is very bitter about something or other, probably politics, the second law of thermodynamics, the Second Coming, or ecology: Kilgore Trout tells his parakeet, Bill, that "humanity deserved to die horribly, since it had behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet."

After Trout became famous, of course, one of the biggest mysteries about him was whether he was kidding or not. He told one persistent questioner that he always crossed his fingers when he was kidding.

"And please note," he went on, "that when I gave you that priceless piece of information, my fingers were crossed."

And so on.

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"And so on," a three-word paragraph of apparently limitless significance to Vonnegut (as "So it goes" was in an earlier Vonnegut best-seller), averages an appearance every dozen pages in this 300-page novel, which scatters among the author's kiddie-style illustrations of flags and beavers a number of the most unresourceful verbal tics since "frankly," "hopefully," and "you know." Here is what the here-is-what tic looks like: "Here is what Dwayne said to the policemen as they cuffed his hands behind his back: 'Thank God you're here!' "; "Here is what the pennant said . . ."; "Here was the explanation . . ."; "Here was the F.B.I. evaluation . . ."; "Here is what the badges said . . ."; "He snarled at his recollection of it afterwards. Here is what he snarled: 'Dumb fucking bird.' " Here are samples of the ironically (not to mention undeniably) simple-minded definition: "A Nigger was a human being who was black"; "Thanksgiving Day was a holiday when everybody in the country was expected to express gratitude to the Creator of the Universe, mainly for food"; "the clitoris, a tiny meat cylinder which was right above the hole in women where men were supposed to stick their much larger cylinders"; "He was a graduate of West Point, a military academy which turned young men into homicidal maniacs for use in war." And here quite at home is the mindless repetition:

> Trout marveled at what a big animal the idiot was. The idiot's happiness was fascinating, too, as he stoked himself with calories which would get him through yet another day.
>
> Trout said this to himself: "Stoking up for another day."

"Trout did another thing which some people might have considered eccentric: he called mirrors *leaks*"; whereupon, when somebody says "I'm going to take a leak," Trout is empowered to retort: "Back where I come from, that means you're going to steal a mirror." About halfway through the book Vonnegut begins recording for posterity, with no immediate dramatic provocation, the length and circumference of the engorged penis ("like a plugged-up garden hose") of each of his male characters. There is even, surprisingly, a gratuitous libel on chimpanzees: "Trout couldn't tell one politician from another one. They were all formlessly enthusiastic chimpanzees to him. He wrote a story one time about an optimistic chimpanzee who became President of the United States." Vonnegut has lost his bearings: chimpanzees are (like beavers) *lower* animals, therefore morally and ecologically *sound*, would therefore make *great* Presidents, would do *good*. Here is the good they would do . . .

Poor Roth has lost not only his bearings but his marbles, mixing alliterative dictionary lists, baseball, skits on anti-Communism, funny names (Word Smith, Gil Gamesh, Sy Clops, Base Baal, Spit Baal, Capt. Smerdyakov, Maj. Stavrogin, Col. Raskolnikov, "the International Lenin School for Subversion, Hatred, Infiltration, and Terror, known popularly as SHIT"), literary jokes ("Mister Fairsmith cried out twice,

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a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!' "), and a bellyful of sex nausea into *The Great American Novel:*

> "Aw, lay off, Hot," said Big John. "It warn't no old lady. If you ask me, it was a ringer named Gamesh."
>
> But Nickname, wiping the warpaint of his own blood and tears across his cheek with the back of his mitt, blubbered, "But it *was* a old lady, Jawn, that's the worst of it. *That's* how come I dropped the ball! It weren't them spikes that scared me, Hot. Look, I took 'em full in the letters."
>
> "Then *what?*" screamed Hot. "Was you bein' *polite* to her that you lost the ball?"
>
> "No! No! It's, it's when she raised up her leg—that's how come I lost it! I damn near went unconscious."
>
> "*Why*?" demanded Hothead.
>
> "Aw jeez, Hot, I ain't never smelled nothin' like that at second base before. Or in a cathouse even. It stunk like somethin' that's been left out somewhere and turned green. I ain't lyin' to you, Hot —I thought maybe it was a shrimp boat dockin' at the bag. Only worse! Then my whole life flashed before my eyes, and I thought, by Jesus, I'm gonna *die* from whatever it is."
>
> "That keen, huh?" said Big John.
>
> "Keen? I'druther be drownin' in a swamp!"
>
> "Well," said Big John, consoling the catcher as he and Nickname each took the dumbstruck Hothead by an arm and helped him back to the Mundy dugout, "old or young, they all of them knows how to get the use out of that thing, don't they? Cheer up now, ol' Hothead, you ain't the first feller to get done in by the black hole of Calcutta —or the last either."

So much for the national sport.[2]

Roth was doubtless pleased to learn, having credited Smitty with a nocturnal passion for Chaucer, that Alan Lelchuk (or one of his narrators) regards Chaucer as a talented precursor of Roth's: "there's enough real obscenity . . . [in Chaucer,] scatological humor and sexual farce to make him a very contemporary figure, a kind of Philip Roth of the fourteenth century. . . ." Such dense and flashy intellectual pearls drop often from Lelchuk's pages—"those two smart Jews, Proust and Freud"; "the shrewd psychopath" Dostoevsky; "Tolstoy, Goethe, and other sentimentalists"—though the reader must bear in mind that *American Mischief,* told entirely through the consciousnesses of two

[2] Have Roth and Vonnegut "never seen anything worth seeing nor loved anything worth loving"? Santayana seems to have had the two of them in mind: "The picture of life as an eternal war for illusory ends was drawn at first by satirists, unhappily with too much justification in the facts. Some grosser minds, too undisciplined to have ever pursued a good either truly attainable or truly satisfactory, then proceeded to mistake that satire on human folly for a sober account of the whole universe; and finally others were not ashamed to represent it as the ideal itself—so soon is the dyer's hand subdued to what it works in. . . ."

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highly unreliable narrators, teems with irony, ambiguity, paradox, and bad writing. The first narrator is a college dean who not only services six mistresses but serves as their psychotherapist without portfolio; a lay analyst so to speak: "Scarred by the lack of a father's closeness and by the confusions of her past, poor Gwen craved intelligent but decisive authority in a man"; "the source of her crazed sexuality . . . [was] the fact that with two small bumps for breasts, she had to compensate somehow (to win her father and the rest of us men)";

> One day, . . . leafing through a childhood scrapbook of Kate's, I came across an interesting photograph. It showed Kate's father, a handsome jut-jawed man in his thirties, holding his little daughter upon his lap, while Mother sat next to him. What struck me immediately was that his hand seemed to be placed beneath the flimsy skirt of the five-year-old girl, upon her haunches. I questioned Kate and found out, after some embarrassed hedging and forgetting, that one of Daddy's fondest terms of affection was "my little fanny love," a tribute to his special feeling for that part of her anatomy. Gently I continued my probing and precipitated in Kate the memory of frequent "mock spankings" that her father administered to her. . . .

American Mischief aspires to be the thinking man's *Jonathan Livingston Segal,* but turns into another kiddie-book of monsters. Awful all the way, it hits bottom with the assassination of "Norman Mailer" by means of a bullet up his ass. The assonant assassin is a meteorological menace named Lenny Pincus, the second of Lelchuk's narrators, who draws us into the very liver and lights of the Weatherman: "Yes," muses Lenny, "there was something special about abandoning morals or transcending them." He and his confederates do various messy things inside museums and libraries. They also set up a concentration camp for New York intellectuals, who unlike "Mailer" aren't given names but only single initials: "A." has a "boyish" unruly forelock and a propensity for going down on nubile seamen; "E." is a professor at Columbia, an Arnold and Forster specialist, who as a phase of his re-education is forced to watch fellatio being performed on Lenny (by a *girl,* thank God!). According to a recent news account Mailer (not "Mailer"), apprised of his premature death, is said to have promised that when he was through with Lelchuk (not "Lelchuk") nothing would be left "except a few fillings." The New York intellectual called "A." died (really) a few months ago; no ruminative think-piece from "E." So far on the relation between traditional culture and shlock-shock-sock pseudo-nonfic novels.

Strange Peaches also raids the headlines for its pasteboard monsters, among them a 93-year-old Texas oil billionaire who can break out anywhere—shopping at a supermarket, for instance—into a piping rendition of one of his own home-made pieces of backwoods music. The place is Dallas, the year is 1963; and, if Shrake wanted to prove that maybe Stendhal or Tolstoy could deal with such iron necessity in a

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novel but that nobody else could, he has succeeded. The Texas establishment flaunts its king-size mediocrity; Jack Ruby struts and frets on and off stage; the protagonist—star of the top TV cowboy series—lives on bennies, martinis, Scotch, and Almond Joy candy bars, threatening to make the authentic movie about Texas; Shrake's mind and style aren't up to much beyond human-interest journalism and hard-boiled dialogue; The Event looms closer and closer; and when at last it's here Shrake doesn't find anything new or sensational to say about it. Yet because he isn't trying to exploit it, because—on the assumption that there's something to understand—he's still trying to understand and assimilate it, the book has a small, persistent note of dignity and sadness.

John Berryman's unfinished posthumous novel makes do without monsters, but its subject is as impossible as Shrake's: the hospital treatment of alcoholics. The trouble with sick people is that they nurse the indispensable delusion that there is a human condition called health. If *Recovery* is a truthful account (and it reads like one, crammed with busy, noisy, daily, infinitely hopeless "challenges," "encounters," "confrontations"), alcoholics are commanded to believe that, if they keep examining their own motives and everybody else's with perfect honesty twenty-four hours a day, they will find the way back to health:

> Alan and Hutch made common cause. Each had been accused of being unable to level. "Okay," Severance said to the big man on the way down to lunch after Group, "maybe we can help each other. Let's talk after lecture this afternoon." They agreed on Hutch's room, and picking up a cup of coffee at two-fifteen he went carefully down the hall and knocked on the half-open door, heard a voice, and walked in.
>
> Hutch was standing on the near side of the bed, with a book in his hand, looking as if he had been about to go somewhere. The bedtable had a book and a magazine on it. The bed was neat and empty. The long windowsill, where patients kept things, was empty. No clothes were visible. The top of the bureau was empty. Severance felt odd before he realized why he felt odd: the room was *all right*. That is to say, all wrong. It looked as if nobody lived there.
>
> "Hutch," he said involuntarily, "why is your room so damned neat?"
>
> "What's neat about it?" very defensively.
>
> "Well, look at it."
>
> Hutch looked around uneasily. "What's wrong with that? I'm just neat, that's all."
>
> "You are? You told me the other night your workshop was a shambles."
>
> "My office is open to inspection at any moment." He sounded angry. . . .

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There is no end to this sort of thing except hatred and collapse, followed by a new round of attack-and-defense in the guise of straight-from-the-shoulder, comradely exchanges: "leveling"; and Berryman, who seems to have been a decent man and an accurate observer, doggedly registered the recurrences even while he tried to suggest that recurrence isn't fate but only will or accident. Though Berryman's notes indicate that his hero would have been back out into the world at the close, feeling "lucky," "happy," "fine," the title is an embarrassment and the book full of unacknowledgeable despair.

Of course *Recovery* isn't a novel except by courtesy; it has the interest and pathos of a personal document. *Catholics*, on the other hand, is all fabrication, from the first two sentences: "The fog lifted. The island was there." Chapter 2 begins: "The helicopter drifted over the crossroads, the pub, the yard, then, tilting slightly forward, moved downwind to land in a field on the edge of the bog. The rotor blades still turned at take-off speed as Kinsella hurried towards the machine in the afternoon's continuing drizzle, ducking under the great propellers as the pilot slid the door aside and held out a hand to take him up." And Chapter 3:

> Kinsella woke at seven. In the rectangle of window above his bed, the sky was already light. Gulls rode that sky, kites held by invisible string. When, dressed and shaven, he opened the guest house door and stepped outside, he met the rush of breakers on shore, a long retreating roar of water. Obbligato of gull cries overhead, their harsh, despairing scream seeming to mourn a death. Winds whipped like penny tops, spinning the long grasses this way and that. The sky, immense, hurried, shifted its scenery of ragged clouds. From the cove below, four curraghs were putting out to sea. . . .

Such efficient descriptive prose, almost as efficient as the movie shots into which it will be converted frame by frame from this slick script, which doesn't scruple to tip off the casting director besides: "With his curling red hair, freckled skin, snub nose and white fisherman's sweater he looked like Dylan Thomas"; "Father Matthew, six feet five inches tall, the biggest man on Muck, . . . physically and in temperament, . . . resembled General de Gaulle." *Catholics*—my God it's money in the bank, Brian Moore must have thought while dreaming it up—is about a time very soon when Rome has become Amsterdam and Amsterdam the ecumenical capital of the world ("the *apertura* with Buddhism"), and the only Latin Mass and private confession in the world are being given by the monks of an island abbey off the coast of Ireland. Tourists, alerted by a BBC program, flock in by supersonic jet, and a young American priest in the new denim uniform is despatched from Rome to put down the heretics. Daniel Berrigan plays the American priest; the Archangel Gabriel plays the Abbot of Muck, his weathered old mug aglint with wisdom, doubt, and anguish: "*Aggiornamento,* was that when uncertainty had begun? . . . And, long ago, that righteous

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prig at Wittenberg nailing his defiance to the church door." And long long ago that silly girl who ate of the forbidden fruit. And Lucifer, damn him.

Nothing would appear to be more of a fabrication than the *nouveau roman,* of which Nathalie Sarraute[3] continues to turn out her nevertheless utterly personal, crabbed, cranky, grimly literary (at any rate not cinematic!) instances. For Mme. Sarraute, motives continue to range freely between malice and paranoia; the manner is by now as assured as a funeral director's; and the familiar substance becomes thinner and thinner. *Between Life and Death* is the last volume of her trilogy (the first two: *The Planetarium* and *The Golden Fruits*) about French literary life, which she continues to represent as pure murder:

> "We, in any case . . ." and before he can move away, that sudden pounce . . . "we, in any case, we will at least have had that . . ." in one second the enormous rings have curled up, they are clasped around him . . . "we shall have had at least that, to have lived at the same time he did . . ." and the cracking of his crushed bones.

Artists have to face up also to the virulently contemptuous bourgeoisie: "ah, these poets"; and "How much did they take to publish that?" Artists are touchy: "they must all have heard the rending sound his skin made as it came off like the hide of a rabbit being flayed." Mme. Sarraute tries to vindicate the sensitive plant by showing it in the very act of producing leaves and flowers:

> It's first one image then another . . . it's snatches of conversation, or perhaps merely an intonation, an accent through which runs a rapid movement, that are as though seized, shaken by a brief convulsion.
>
> This movement must be caught, we must isolate it, try . . . wouldn't it be possible in order for it to recur more clearly and evolve, to create more favorable conditions? . . . to insert it elsewhere, among other, better assembled images, other words or intonations, the way we transplant a wild shoot in improved earth, enriched with loam, fortified with fertilizer, in an enclosed spot, a hothouse in which the appropriate temperature is constantly maintained? . . .

But the reader keeps hoping for a better product and not so much bad feeling at the root of it.

With *Do You Hear Them?* the reader comes to the end of his hope, for Mme. Sarraute's latest novel is all bad feeling and no acceptable product at all:

> —Scold? . . . Ah, a lot they would care. That would be something. It's been a long time since I had the right to say a word. They are the ones who lay down the law. Somebody said that at present par-

[3] I reviewed her first six books and discussed their theoretical preconceptions in "Sarraute, Duras, Burroughs, Barthelme, and a Postscript," HUDSON REVIEW, XX (Autumn 1967), pp. 473-478.

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ents treat their offspring like distinguished guests . . . with infinite consideration . . . You walk on tiptoe, you shrink in size, you feel rewarded when they deign to show forbearance . . . But then you must have deserved it. Nothing is overlooked . . . not so much as that. . . He makes a clacking sound with his thumbnail against his teeth . . . and believe me, there are no limits. The more you give in to them, the more exigent they become . . . .

—not an unduly protracted joke, but a whole book of (somebody's) malice and paranoia on the sins of children, those murderers of art, authority, and the past, jeering monster-children who intend to drive their elders mad:

—That laughter . . . do you hear them? Those little titters . . . sharp as needles. . . But wake up, don't look so vacant. . . Those titters like the drops of water that are made to drip on the heads of torture victims . . . they drip on us, to make us suffer, to destroy us. . . Don't you really hear them? What are you made of, anyway? No, of course, you can't believe me. You can't believe such deceit as that . . . The other sits up, staring wide-eyed at him. . . But how could you not notice when . . . at the moment when you had the imprudence . . . when you were mad enough. . . —I? Mad? Ah, that's a good one. . .—Yes, mad . . . leaning over, seizing the animal with both hands, brandishing it in his face. . . Yes, I'll say so, mad. Fit to be tied . . . to dare, in front of them, to go and take it, set it there, contemplate it . . . they rose, they pushed it away, they went upstairs, and now they're defiling, destroying . . . everything . . . everything that makes life worth living . . . look how they make me talk . . . what grandiloquence, what lack of reserve . . . see what they're doing to me . . . they're slowly finishing me off. . . .

No doubt *Do You Hear Them?* was meant as a dramatization of one possible psychotic attitude.

Edmund White rehabilitates Mme. Sarraute, however, by serving this vegetarian imitation of her cannibal intentions:

Suddenly Herbert slams his book down on the table between us and says, "I think we have a little work to do today, don't you?" He says the first few words too loudly and immediately lowers his voice. He's staring at me with determination, or is it anger, as though he's let things out of hand and must now, belatedly, buckle down. No, maybe he's received orders from above and is so embarrassed about transmitting them to me that he's hiding his embarrassment behind gruffness. . . .

He stands and I do the same, though, somewhat clownishly, I pause for an instant, pretending laziness or reluctance, before levering myself out of the chair in a burst by grabbing the armrests with my hands and pushing down; a slight joke, registered by my body alone and not by anything so controversial as a smile. Even so, I

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> mustn't lend so much character to my actions until I discover what sort of person I'm generally considered to be.

Such mystifications derive from the premise that the hero of *Forgetting Elena* has amnesia but for reasons unrevealed to us can't just say so and find out who the hell he is rather than finicking on: I didn't know whether to wink or blink. I decided to blink, and, blinking, feared I ought to have winked. I noticed that X's face assumed—or did it fall naturally into?—an expression supercilious if not in fact fawning.

Just Sheaffer or Storms in the Troubled Heir is one of those uproarious British romps that, if they happen to be put together in the guise of plays, hold unwary American visitors to London theaters transfixed in wild surmise at British bum-humor (such names as "Ramsbottom," "Winterbottom," "Ramupsavich"), watercloset-humor, and (compound imperial tasties for the jaded palate) Queen's-bum-and-watercloset-humor:

> ". . . good place for a ponder, the old bowl. You don't happen to know if the Queen gets her toilet paper free?"
>
> "What?"
>
> "The Queen," repeated Sheaffer. "Does she pay for her own toilet tissue?"
>
> "Never thought about it," said Father Scraw, cackling into the receiver.
>
> "Well," continued Sheaffer, "you know that businesses make goods by appointment to the Queen—purveyors of this, that, and the next thing. Well, maybe there's a purveyor of toilet paper."
>
> "Could be," said Father Scraw. "Wonder what kind she uses."
>
> "Something soft for the royal bum," said Sheaffer. . . .

Sheaffer, flushed with success, whooshes away down the drain of old school-tie snufflepooperism while, out in the Queen's former colonies, rather less bubbly chaps are trying to find ways of accommodating Asian or African particularities to what's left of English fiction. Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian: most of his stories are correct and unsurprising in style, treatment, and subject—chips off Waugh's *Black Mischief* ("The Voter"); cross-cultural conflict ("Dead Man's Path"); incomplete adaptations to English culture and religion ("Vengeful Creditor," "Marriage Is a Private Affair"); the Nigerian civil war ("Civil Peace," "Sugar Baby," "Girls at War"); growing up with an alien language ("Chike's School Days," a pleasant story about a little boy who collects English words as if they were seashells). The only pieces freshly imagined are the retellings and reinventions of local legend, especially "The Madman":

> The madman watched him for quite a while. Each time he bent down to carry water in cupped hands from the shallow stream to his head and body the madman smiled at his parted behind. And then remembered. This was the same hefty man who brought three

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others like him and whipped me out of my hut in the Afo market. He nodded to himself. And he remembered again: this was the same vagabond who descended on me from the lorry in the middle of my highway. He nodded once more. And then he remembered yet again: this was the same fellow who set his children to throw stones at me and make remarks about their mother's buttocks, not mine. Then he laughed.

Nwibe turned sharply round and saw the naked man laughing, the deep grove of the stream amplifying his laughter. Then he stopped as suddenly as he had begun; the merriment vanished from his face.

"I have caught you naked," he said.

Nwibe ran a hand swiftly down his face to clear his eyes of water.

"I say I have caught you naked, with your thing dangling about."

Naked-shameless mirroring naked-shamed, madman mirroring not-yet-tempted, till, tempted, the pursued turns pursuer and goes mad in the pursuit.

The three other books by women are all of them manifestations of feminine sensibility (Mme. Sarraute, bless her dripping fangs, is too obstinately eccentric to disclose any secondary sex characteristics). The best book of the three, and her own worst, is Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*. Its subject is the disintegration of a middle-aged middle-class housewife, during her first summer past the point of usefulness to her once-dependent husband and children. She has a summer of adventures: as an interpreter with an international agency; in an affair with a young American, whom, reverting to her accustomed rôle, she must tend in his illness; anonymously back in London, very ill herself, then sharing a hippie pad with a girl who becomes her confidante, mentor, daughter, surrogate, till (unconvincingly) the housewife decides to pick up and go home. The first half of the book carries on under a burden of desiccated post-mortem ironies:

> . . . in their joint bedroom, were two books, side by side, one by Bertrand Russell called *The Conquest of Happiness,* and one by Van der Velde, *Ideal Marriage*. From Kate to Michael—Russell; and from Michael to Kate—Van der Velde. Both inscriptions read: "For The First Phase. With all my love." This commemorated the fact that a phase had ended when their delicious love affair had to end, and they married. They had known that things must change, that the deliciousness must abate, and their long discussions about it all were summed up by these friendly books, From Kate to Michael, From Michael to Kate, *For The First Phase*. Now, picking up these books and opening them on the inscription page, both might have been caught out in a humorous grimace, *had* been caught out by each other, which led to frank and certainly healthy laughter. (Laughter is by definition healthy.) The point was why the humorous grimace at all? . . . .

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The second half is less offensive because in this half the stink of the sickness is out in the open and all around us, as, for instance, when Kate Brown demonstrates that "it's all a con":

> High in the air men walked on planks, dangled buckets, wielded trowels, manipulated cranes. Men were working, too, at ground level, preparing what was to be hoisted aloft. Kate realised that she was standing still, staring; had been for some minutes. The men took no notice of her.
>
> The fact that they didn't suddenly made her angry. She walked away out of sight, and there, took off her jacket—Maureen's—showing her fitting dark dress. She tied her hair dramatically with a scarf. Then she strolled back in front of the workmen, hips conscious of themselves. A storm of whistles, calls, invitations. Out of sight the other way, she made her small transformation and walked back again: the men glanced at her, did not see her. She was trembling with rage: it was a rage, it seemed to her, that she had been suppressing for a lifetime. And it was a front for worse, a misery that she did not want to answer, for it was saying again and again: This is what you have been doing for years and years and years.
>
> She made the transit again, as a sex object, and saw that a girl dressed like a Dutch doll stood on a corner opposite, watching. Full yellow skirts, a tight red jacket, hair in yellow curls, a bright pink patch on either cheek, wide blue eyes.
>
> Kate arrived beside Maureen and said, "And that's what it is all worth."

The narrator seems to be not just describing, here and elsewhere, a nervous breakdown but actually having one.

Life Signs transposes the etiology of that epidemic ailment housewife's staggers to a Greenwich Village apartment and a psychiatrist's office uptown. Pregnant Camilla, beautiful bright coed metamorphosed into jittery young wife-and-mother, begins to wake up screaming. Visits to a psychiatrist do no good, an idyllic session with a breast-fetishist does no good, smart-aleck yackety-yack does no good, till smart Alec discovers what is the (most recent) cause of all the misery in the world—the psychiatrist's psilly pills! and sweeps his little family majestically out of the lair of the crazy shrink:

> Manos, exasperated, shook Alec's hand. "It isn't just the pills," he argued. "She badly needs her sleep patterns regulated, she should be removed from the family situation . . ."
>
> "There we have it, begging your pardon, in a nutshell," said Alec, plucking Jacob off the lavender wall-to-wall onto which (Camilla, already elated, made room for bonus delight) he had emptied the major portion of his juice bottle. "See, it's not a family situation, Dr. Manos," continued Alec, wincing with the sudden blast of April sunlight outside the door. "It's a family."

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That cocky definitive riposte and blast of sunlight warm the soapy cockles; but *Life Signs* ends, after the Alec-assisted birth of Emma, with an unmistakable air of whistling in the dark: "It was one whole week before she began to sleepwalk. Just as well, she and Alec agreed, since she had to be up anyway, to feed Emma. It was nothing worth worrying about, in any case. Nothing was." Alec had better get smart again soon—like by Wednesday next.

Judith Rascoe's collection of stories emphasizes how fragile women are: "... a daughter, who was moody and talkative, already damaged by the broken marriage." Also how catty heroines have the right to be: "After the divorce I often saw Louis at parties accompanied by the lady of the porcelain horse, who was small and brutally inexperienced [the *horse*?]. She glanced at other people through brilliant blue contact lenses with no curiosity whatsoever." Marriage is a series of random catastrophes, life is the brilliant blue anteroom at Forest Lawn, men are chumps:

> My friends . . . tried to find me somebody else. Charley and Betsy called me to come to dinner. Betsy served roast beef and Charley served his old school friends, most of whom were a good deal like Charley. They were all slight of build, even-tempered and scared of women, and most of them scientists of one sort or another. . . .

"Yours, and Mine" (note the comma, signifying separation) is sheer rampant girlish guck, a one-woman exhibition of *Angst* in beautiful Santa Barbara, and appropriately concludes with a thunderous symbolic allusion to the Santa Barbara oil spill:

> A magazine had pictures of it, and I cut one out. It shows a man standing in the water and holding up a dying bird. You can't tell its species. It had seen a fish glinting through a wave, I suppose, but when it dived to seize it, oil flowed over the surface of the water and clung to its feathers, and it couldn't fly away. The oil companies have promised to rescue as many of these birds as they can.

In fact the bird was later identified as a red-eyed bluetit, more or less female.

Miss Rascoe writes what critics used to call, before they were intimidated by angry rebuttals from *New Yorker* editors who insisted that there was no such thing, a *New Yorker* short story: which, if there *were* such a thing, would rely on a manner deliberately sleek and casual to imply dizzying unplumbed depths; a predilection for childlike whimsy, wry irony, nostalgia, life's bitter mystery; an occasional offhand boulder-sized symbol to make a dot-sized point—

> . . . a cactus hedge. . . . They are what all plants must be at the core. They get hideously scarred and go on living, unable to cast off the scarred portions, growing slowly and stubbornly, looking as if they

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> have the right by their very ugliness to dispute every inch of ground with man and animal. Oh, I should like to remember the exact color of the meadow covered with tall grass, but I remember the cactus more clearly. . . .

—Miss Rascoe's apprentice best. Donald Barthelme, the quirkily "modern" *New Yorker* master, does better; and John Cheever, old pro, is the smoothest of all, managing in most of his stories to veil past, present, and future in a fine gray spittle of arbitrary disillusion:

> "Will you never learn, Leander, that lamb must be carved against the grain?" she would ask. . . . After five or six wounding remarks my father would wave the carving knife in the air and shout: "Will you kindly mind your own business, will you kindly shut up?" She would sigh once more and put her hand to her heart. Surely this was her last breath. Then, studying the air above the table she would say: "Feel that refreshing breeze."
>
> There was, of course, seldom a breeze. It could be airless, midwinter, rainy, anything. The remark was one for all seasons. Was it a commendable metaphor for hope, for the serenity of love (which I think she had never experienced), was it nostalgia for some summer evening when, loving and understanding, we sat contentedly on the lawn above the river? Was it no better or no worse than the sort of smile thrown at the evening star by a man who is in utter despair? Was it a prophecy of that generation to come who would be so drilled in evasiveness that they would be denied forever the splendors of a passionate confrontation?

(That last rhetorical question is nonsense—What "generation to come" is he talking about? the Lost Generation? post-World-War-II?—but part of the charm of such writing is that its disillusion depends on a strict abstention from thinking.) Today, in the American tourists' Rome, the narrator hears a different voice, "the voice of an American woman. She is screaming. 'You're a goddamned fucked-up no-good insane piece of shit. . . .' . . . Why would I sooner describe church bells and flocks of swallows? Is this puerile, a sort of greeting-card mentality, a whimsical and effeminate refusal to look at facts? . . ." (The answer to *this* question seems obvious—such writing aims at intimating that, though life is almost nothing but questions, the few answers are all obvious: beauty, truth, church bells, money . . .)

Cheever has a thing about pornography, and nearly loses his temper attacking it directly in two of the stories. Moreover, in the title story of *The World of Apples* he seems to be offering his careful and oblique rejoinder to the threat. A Frost-like American poet in his eighties, resident in Italy, finds himself suddenly and against his will a dirty-minded old man; makes a pilgrimage to "the sacred angel of Monte Giordano," to whom he gives his most cherished literary medal and,

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kneeling, prays "loudly: 'God bless Walt Whitman. God bless Hart Crane. God bless Dylan Thomas. God bless William Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald, and especially Ernest Hemingway' "; bathes naked under a waterfall as he remembers having seen his father do many years ago; and is restored—"in the morning he began a long poem on the inalienable dignity of light and air that, while it would not get him the Nobel Prize, would grace the last months of his life." End of book, and just as well too, since that poem would be as easy to predict as it was to propose.

Of course the *New Yorker* story isn't a story in the traditional meaning of the word, it's a pretext for the writer's sensibility (which is likely to seem feminine because displays of sensibility have been considered a woman's prerogative). One of the pleasures of reading Malamud's new collection is that his stories make so archaic an effort to establish themselves as distinct structures: they can even be *remembered.*

The best of them are the two shortest, hardly more than vignettes, rigorously bleak. "The Letter" is an unsealed blank envelope with four blank sheets of paper inside; Teddy, one of the inmates at the state hospital, asks Newman to mail it for him whenever Newman is on the way out after visiting his father, and on the last occasion Teddy's father, also an inmate, adds his own plea:

> "Mail it anyway for the poor kid," said Ralph. His tall body trembled. He was an angular man with deep-set bluish eyes and craggy features that looked as though they had been hacked out of a tree.
>
> "I told your son I would if he wrote something on the paper," Newman said.
>
> "What do you want it to say?"
>
> "Anything he wants it to. Isn't there somebody he wants to communicate with? If he doesn't want to write it he could tell me what to say and I'll write it out."
>
> "Tough turd," said Teddy.
>
> "He wants to communicate to me," said Ralph.
>
> "It's not a bad idea," Newman said. "Why doesn't he write a few words to you? Or you could write a few words to him."
>
> "A Bronx cheer on you."
>
> "It's my letter," Teddy said.

"My Son the Murderer" launches itself from the son's gloom about the imminence of his being drafted for Vietnam, but becomes a touching image of the father's love and fear:

> Harry, I'm frightened. Tell me what's the matter. My son, have mercy on me.
>
> I'm frightened of the world, Harry thought. It fills me with fright.
>
> He said nothing.
>
> A blast of wind lifted his father's hat and carried it away over the

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beach. It looked as though it were going to be blown into the surf, but then the wind blew it toward the boardwalk, rolling like a wheel along the wet sand. Leo chased after his hat. He chased it one way, then another, then toward the water. The wind blew the hat against his legs and he caught it. By now he was crying. Breathless, he wiped his eyes with icy fingers and returned to his son at the edge of the water.

He is a lonely man. This is the type he is. He will always be lonely.

My son who made himself into a lonely man.

Harry, what can I say to you? All I can say to you is who says life is easy? Since when? It wasn't for me and it isn't for you. It's life, that's the way it is—what more can I say? But if a person don't want to live what can he do if he's dead? Nothing is nothing, it's better to live.

Come home, Harry, he said. It's cold here. You'll catch a cold with your feet in the water.

Harry stood motionless in the water and after a while his father left. As he was leaving, the wind plucked his hat off his head and sent it rolling along the shore.

My father listens in the hallway. He follows me in the street. We meet at the edge of the water.

He runs after his hat.

My son stands with his feet in the ocean.

"Man in the Drawer" is an ambitious story about an American's encounter in Moscow with a Russian writer who can't get published; but the moral issue is too clear, the synopses of the writer's pieces make them seem dull; the story is inert. In "Notes from a Lady at a Dinner Party" Malamud returns, in an uncomfortable dinner jacket, to the academic scene. The other stories are competent journeyman's work, sometimes better than that, the kind of thing however that Malamud has already done well in his earlier books: "The Silver Crown," Jewish customs with a sinister whiff of magic; "Talking Horse," an amusing beast-fable that goes on too long and is too philosophical. But Malamud repays attention, if only for the sake of the discovery that even honest writers can repeat themselves or write mechanically.

Nabokov's collection of early stories (dated 1927-1940) shows that he was an earnest reader of at least Chekhov and Mann, not necessarily to his advantage. "The Potato Elf," about a circus dwarf, is just as false, and false in the same ways, as Mann's "Little Herr Friedemann": patronizing, sentimental, calculable in the humiliations that the author, fancying himself a well of compassion or of objective truth, heaps on his homunculus. "Lips to Lips" and "An Affair of Honor" are more Chekhovian-ironic, but like "The Potato Elf" they take rather too much satisfaction in the humiliations suffered by the pro-

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tagonists, who differ from any of Chekhov's by being all but absolute sad sacks. Nabokov seems to prefer stationary targets: in "The Leonardo" he goes after Nazi-type brutes ("Gigantic, imperiously reeking of sweat and beer with beefy voices and senseless speeches, with fecal matter replacing the human brain . . ."); in "A Dashing Fellow" he fires away at the sexual peccadilloes of a traveling salesman ("We are alone in a third-class compartment—alone and, therefore, bored") and ends with a stupefying moral thud:

> The train was crammed, the heat stifling. We feel out of sorts, but do not quite know if we are hungry or drowsy. But when we have fed and slept, life will regain its looks, and the American instruments will make music in the merry café described by our friend Lange. And then, sometime later, we die.

The title story is near-Chekhov with a mild Nabokovian sneer; there are a couple of long pieces foreshadowing the precious, unctuous, ferocious, and cynical American prestidigitator who arrived in a puff of Mephistophelean smoke with *Lolita;* even a story ("Terra Incognita"), not very interesting in itself, that suggests its author may have been reading Raymond Roussel. "The Visit to the Museum," on the other hand, after a characteristic indulgence in digressive snobbery, settles down as a personally felt and impressively constructed piece in the form of an exile's nightmare; "Breaking the News" is slighter in subject and theme but affecting throughout: in both of them the author, for a change, becomes too personally involved to keep playing his roguish tricks of personality—

> . . . every time I turned and tried to retrace my steps along the passages, I found myself in hitherto unseen places—a greenhouse with hydrangeas and broken window-panes with the darkness of artificial night showing through beyond; or a deserted laboratory with dusty alembics on its tables. Finally I ran into a room of some sort with coatracks monstrously loaded down with black coats and astrakhan furs, from beyond a door came a burst of applause, but when I flung the door open, there was no theater, but only a soft opacity and splendidly counterfeited fog with the perfectly convincing blotches of indistinct streetlights. . . .

Malamud hasn't developed at all from his earliest stories, and admirers of Nabokov will be outraged by the mere naming of their hero in the same sentence; but Nabokov's development tends to resemble a creeping elephantiasis of traits that weren't attractive from the beginning, though in the beginning they at least permitted him to have literary ancestors. Ultimately Nabokov, like Joyce, eliminates art by creating the autonomous author: sensibility orbiting perpetually on itself. Malamud isn't a great writer, but he isn't a monster either, and he never tires (as Nabokov tired early) of breaking the news from somewhere out in the world.

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WILLIAM H. YOUNGREN

What Is Literary Theory?

THE FIRST THING TO SAY ABOUT *In Search of Literary Theory*[1] is that on the whole it is an astonishingly bad book: two of its six essays are theoretically worthless, two are worth precious little, one is stimulating but wrongheaded, and one is absolutely superb. This dismal record is astonishing not only because of the distinguished list of contributors—M. H. Abrams, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Morton W. Bloomfield, Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man—but also because of the time, care, and collaborative effort that evidently went into the book's formation. In his preface Professor Bloomfield lovingly describes the initial discussions in the fall of 1967, the two subsequent foundation-supported conferences, and the still further "exchanges of discussion and criticism" that led at last to the publication, in the Spring 1970 issue of *Daedalus,* of eleven papers; five of these are reprinted here, together with one by Abrams that was not ready in time for the *Daedalus* publication.

The two worst essays, those by Hirsch and Bloomfield, are devoted to proving that the humanities are at least as intellectually respectable as the sciences. Hirsch takes the rough-and-ready way of simply redefining science as knowledge and then proclaiming that since the humanities seek knowledge they are scientific:

> "Science" *is* "knowledge," both in etymology and in fact. All serious inquiry, including humanistic inquiry, aims at knowledge and is consequently scientific. It is scientific in precisely the same sense that geology or physics is scientific.

Bloomfield goes the opposite route: instead of obliterating all the crucial distinctions of method between (and within) the sciences and the humanities, he melodramatically insists on an absolute split between the sciences, which offer merely "classification," and the humanities, which offer "experience." Not surprisingly, this works out to the advantage of the humanities, which, he loftily tells us, "demand something more than the natural sciences." Whereas "the scientific approach that looks at experience and events and objects from the outside is so pervasive today that little really needs to be done to describe it," the humanities are thrillingly complex and mysterious because of their "dual way" of knowing, "from the outside or from the inside":

[1] IN SEARCH OF LITERARY THEORY, edited by *Morton W. Bloomfield.* Cornell University Press. $9.75.

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> Humanistic study has, then, this unique characteristic—that its own subject matter is in some way and in varying degree in competition with itself as a way of knowing. The humanities are a way of knowing dealing with an alternative way of knowing and are subject to all the restraints, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in such a situation.

There is a great deal more of this sort of thing—all about how "the double pull of the humanities puts us at times into a dilemma," and how "the pursuit of the humanities has become in some ways nightmarish," and so on. But all it seems to amount to is that Bloomfield started from the assumption that the dichotomies science-humanities and classification-experience should match up perfectly with two others, outside-inside and objective-subjective, but then found that they didn't. For while it may be possible to believe that all the sciences do is classify external objects, the notion that the humanities, in offering "experience," directly transmit something inward or subjective is more troublesome. The humanist may indeed often be concerned to communicate what Bloomfield calls "the inner feel of experience" of his subject matter, but the only way he can do this is by describing or recreating that experience in language that is bound by much the same objective standards of truth, logic, and relevance as the language used by scientists and everyone else. "Part of the humanistic process," Bloomfield observes, "is obviously analytic and scientific." But of course this fact will seem mysterious or paradoxical only to a mind committed to thinking in these crude dichotomies.

Geoffrey Hartman is not worried by science, but he is concerned to defend literature. This defense can best be mounted, he feels, by creating a new kind of literary history, "a history from the point of view of the poets—from within their consciousness of the historical vocation of art." This new history "alone can provide today a sorely needed defense of art" by helping "to restore [the artist's] faith in two things: in form and in his historical vocation." Now of course the idea that artists can or will acquire whatever confidence they may need, whether in themselves or in their art, by reading literary history is just an academic's fantasy. Literary history is read by teachers and graduate students, not by artists, and anyhow the ways in which artists do get what they need are both mysterious and various. Not so, however, in Hartman's neatly deterministic little scheme, according to which every great writer suffers from "an identity crisis" brought on by his "ambition to seize (and hand on) the flame of inspiration, to identify the genius of art with his own genius or that of a particular age (*genius loci*)." For the last twenty-five pages of the essay Hartman labors to demonstrate the importance to the new literary history of the concept *genius loci*.

Northrop Frye's rambling and digressive 101-page essay "The Criti-

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cal Path," which has already been published as a separate book, is better written and far more entertaining, but it too consists mainly of an elaborate celebration of its own terminology. Frye sets out to show that the literary conventions, genres, and archetypes of every society originate in what he calls its myth of concern, "a fully developed or encyclopedic myth [that] comprises everything that it most concerns its society to know." Even if this were a clear enough assertion to be provable, Frye's way of arguing wouldn't prove it. In a crucial passage near the end he says it is important for literary critics to realize "that all myths of concern are founded on visions of society, and that all visions of society have literary shapes, generally romantic and comic shapes." He therefore defines criticism as "the attempt to attain knowledge of the language of concern and belief." But then a page later we read: "every arrangement of words is a narrative, and so has a narrative shape, and a study of narrative shapes involves the study of literature." The importance to literary critics of "the language of concern and belief" would seem to depend on the fact that the visions of society on which myths of concern are founded "have literary shapes." But if "every arrangement of words . . . has a narrative shape"—and therefore presumably a literary shape, since "a study of narrative shapes involves the study of literature"—why should myths of concern be more important to critics than any other arrangements of words?

Paul de Man's "Literary History and Literary Modernity" is in a different world altogether. Earlier I called it stimulating but wrongheaded—stimulating because of de Man's subtle and convincing analysis of literary modernity, wrongheaded because of the way he tries to move from that analysis to a general characterization of the nature of literature. First, drawing on a fascinating essay of Nietzsche's, he shows how "a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier" leads Nietzsche to a conflicting awareness that he cannot escape from history, and from there to a realization that he must "bring the two incompatibles, history and modernity (now using the term in the full sense of a radical renewal), together in a paradox that cannot be resolved, an aporia that comes very close to describing the predicament of our own present modernity." Then comes the generalization:

> If we see in this paradoxical condition a diagnosis of our own modernity, then literature has always been essentially modern. . . . The appeal of modernity haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods—in the obsession with a *tabula rasa,* with new beginnings—that finds recurrent expression in all forms of writing.

It is the very effectiveness of the analysis, which makes clear just how special and how characteristically modern Nietzsche's "predicament" was, that makes it impossible to believe the generalization.

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Moreover, the only example de Man chooses from before the nineteenth century to illustrate this thesis is very unconvincing. Having earlier noted the way in which the modernist "desire to wipe out whatever came earlier" often "seems to lead outside literature," to action, he tries to find the same progression of thought in those who took the modern side in the dispute between ancients and moderns in seventeenth-century France. Thus he adduces the fact that Charles Perrault "has to resort to the military and imperial achievements of his age to find instances of the superiority of the moderns" as evidence that "such a type of modernism leads outside literature." But surely this is an utterly different case from Nietzsche's: as de Man himself more or less admits, Perrault was merely naively unliterary, not anti-literary in Nietzsche's highly sophisticated and ambivalent manner. It is almost with relief that de Man turns again to a modern example, Baudelaire's essay on Constantin Guys. But again, having shown that Baudelaire's mind moves in a course parallel to Nietzsche's, from a concern with modernity as "a forgetting or a suppression of anteriority" to the need to achieve "a reconciliation between the impulse toward modernity and the demand of the work of art to achieve duration," de Man can't resist the urge to generalize: "The distinctive character of literature thus becomes manifest as an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable."

Quite apart from its specific content and insights, de Man's essay poses a central theoretical question. Obviously, what he intended to give us was a definition or description of "the distinctive character of literature"; I think it is almost equally obvious that the one he gave us is untrue: a moment's thought reveals that it is impossible even to believe (let alone to prove) that all imaginative writers of all ages have felt their situation as writers to be "unbearable" in the very special sense he has so clearly and usefully delineated. So from one standpoint his essay should simply be rejected. But when we recall how good it is, this seems legalistic and self-defeating. For while de Man may not have singled out "the distinctive character of literature," what he has to say about the modern writers he is mainly concerned with not only applies to them but sounds as though it might also be fruitfully applied, with qualification, to some non-modern writers. (I think for example of Dryden as a writer whose sense of his immediate literary past might well be illuminated by what de Man says about Nietzsche and Baudelaire.) Therefore we might decide not simply to reject de Man's essay as untrue but instead to take it as an invitation to look at all literature from a new perspective; we could then gratefully accept the perspective when it offered useful insights and reject it when it didn't.

Now this is in fact what some recent philosophers interested in aesthetics have urged us to do with all traditional theories of art. Their standard example has been Clive Bell, whose theory of significant form

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is rather like de Man's theory—at least as I have interpreted de Man's theory—in that significant form did not turn out to be the distinctive character of visual art, as Bell claimed, but did turn out to be a concept that could usefully be applied not only to the modern pictures Bell was trying to popularize but also to an unexpected variety of pictures from many different periods. Morris Weitz says that the real point of Bell's theory, appearances to the contrary, is "not to define anything but to use the definitional form, almost epigrammatically, to pin-point a crucial recommendation to turn our attention once again to the plastic elements in painting."[2] And William E. Kennick asserts that when Bell announced that art was significant form, he had not "discovered the essence of Art, as the philosophers would have it, . . . but *a new way of looking at pictures.*"[3] Since I have always found this position a congenial one, and especially since de Man's essay seemed to enforce it so neatly, I was very interested to find M. H. Abrams arguing against it in "What's the Use of Theorizing about the Arts?," far and away the best essay in *In Search of Literary Theory.*

In urging us not to take traditional theories of art as they were apparently intended, as definitions of art in general, but rather as invitations to look at particular works of art in a new way, philosophers like Weitz and Kennick have gone on to claim that in fact it is logically impossible to frame an adequate definition of art in general. In this they have been influenced by Wittgenstein, who said that our tendency to assume that adequate definitions of important general terms are always attainable is merely an instance of "our craving for generality." Instead of assuming what *must* be the case, he repeatedly enjoins us to look and see what actually *is* the case: "Don't think—look!" is the plea that runs through his later work. Abrams begins by neatly turning this bit of advice against Weitz, Kennick, and other Wittgensteinian aestheticians (whom I shall henceforth follow Abrams in referring to collectively as "the analysts"). Noting the "striking unanimity" with which the analysts have cited Bell's theory as representative of all aesthetic theory, Abrams asks:

> But is Bell's little book in fact paradigmatic? Do all theories of art consist solely or primarily of the attempt to posit and prove an essential definition of art, or of a type of art? And does the validity of the over-all theoretical enterprise depend on the logical possibility of an essential definition of these general terms? . . . The only way to find out is to look and see. . . .

Bell, as Abrams points out, is really a rather special figure among aesthetic theorists, a poemicist "who was the effective champion of an important revolution in taste, but a bit short on philosophical acu-

[2] The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 1956-57.

[3] "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?," *Mind,* 1958.

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men." Suggesting that we would do better to examine "nonprogrammatic theorists who, by wide consent, have made the most important contributions to our knowledge," he first chooses Aristotle. The role played in the *Poetics* by Aristotle's definition of the arts, Abrams argues, is "not legislative but exploratory, and in a very enlightening way." Definitions are in fact "used only briefly and passingly" by Aristotle, "as a way of introducing one or another area of investigation," and thus Abrams concludes that "the body of the theory does not consist of an attempt—whether vain or successful—to support and 'prove' the definition," but rather of "putting to work the terms, distinctions, and categories proposed in the initial definition . . . in the analysis of the distinctive elements, organization, and characteristic powers of various kinds of poetic art." The resulting theory "makes a valid contribution to knowledge," a "contribution to our ability to see works of art with new eyes." Making this sort of contribution is for Abrams "the primary service of a good critical theory."

Now this sounds very similar to what the analysts have said. But while they believe, as Abrams paraphrases them, "that the admittedly valuable consequences of critical theory are an unintended by-product, a spin-off from an inevitably abortive undertaking," he wants to insist that in the case of the *Poetics* these consequences are "not an inadvertent by-product of Aristotle's attempt at a logical impossibility" but are rather "the result of his deliberate undertaking." Similarly with Coleridge, whose theories the analysts have deplored while applauding his critical practice. "Are we to take it then," asks Abrams, "that Coleridge's criticism is a happy escape from his unfortunate metaphysical theory, or achieved in spite of it? If we look and see, all the indications are otherwise." The very insights that Weitz praised in Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism Abrams finds to be "integral with his [i.e., Coleridge's] metaphysical and critical theory, in that they put to work the terms and categories developed within the theory." Thus Abrams feels that the relation between theory and practice in criticism is both more intimate and more important than the analysts have made it out to be. Citing Kennick's contention that one of the mistakes on which traditional aesthetics was based is the assumption that criticism is impossible without aesthetic theory, Abrams insists that "all criticism presupposes theory": "they are related in the curious way, compounded of quasi-logical and causal relations, that we indicate by terms such as 'foster,' 'generate,' 'suggest,' 'bring out,' or even 'control' and 'inform.' "

All this seems to me brilliantly argued and substantially true, but I don't think Abrams' position is as far from that of the analysts as he thinks it is. What he is proposing seems at most a shift of emphasis—and a very welcome one; he is not so much directly countering the analysts' position as enriching and subtilizing it by bringing out things they have understandably neglected in their polemical zeal. In the first

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place, the claim that the valuable practical consequences of critical theories have been inadvertent or unintended on the part of the theorists, which Abrams makes a good deal of, is not really very important to the analysts' position and is probably undecidable in most cases anyway. More important, the disagreement looks at first glance wider than it is because Abrams is using the central terms of the argument differently from the way the analysts have used them.

When the analysts have argued that successful critical practice need not presuppose valid aesthetic theory, they have usually been arguing against men who have quite seriously maintained that if a critic does not consciously hold, explicitly state, and logically derive his particular judgments from a theory that is at least independently testable or internally coherent (if not demonstrably true), those judgments will be in some way defective, or perhaps even meaningless. Abrams clearly states that by presupposition he does not mean this sort of strict logical relation, and I think the analysts would probably agree that practice does presuppose theory in the cases he cites and in his loose sense of "presuppose." Moreover, they might even to be willing to agree with his contention that this is true of all criticism, for when he is speaking most generally he often uses the word "theory" in an extremely generous way, as virtually interchangeable with "perspective" or "vantage point." In this sense a theory would not need to be explicitly stated or worked out, or perhaps even consciously held as a theory, and so even the practice of a deliberately anti-theoretical critic like F. R. Leavis could be said to presuppose theory.[4] Finally, for Abrams the question of a theory's independent testability or internal coherence (let alone its demonstrable truth) does not even arise, for he uses the word "validity" even more generously than he does the word "theory":

> The test of the validity of a theory is what it proves capable of doing when it is put to work[;] . . . once a concept or assertion is adopted as the basis of a critical theory, its origin and truth-claim, whether empirical or metaphysical, cease to matter, for its validity in this context is to be determined by its power of illumination when brought to bear in the scrutiny of works of art.

The validity of a theory is thus made almost equivalent to its psychological usefulness as a heuristic device: Coleridge's theories are valid because (or in that) they somehow helped him (and perhaps other people) to achieve critical insights of lasting interest and value. This extension of the notion of validity is of course perfectly legitimate, so long as we find a way to stop short of saying (for example) that Yeats's

[4] Anyone interested in this question should know the controversy between Leavis and René Wellek in the pages of *Scrutiny*, 1937. It was reprinted in Eric Bentley's anthology *The Importance of Scrutiny* and Leavis' portion of it is in *The Common Pursuit.*

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theories of history and personality must be valid since they helped to foster and generate some great poetry.

There is much more in this extraordinary essay than I can even allude to here, and I must content myself with citing a long but very important passage from its conclusion. Objecting to Hirsch's fudging of the differences between the humanities and the sciences, Abrams writes:

> Rather than to exaggerate the commonalty of method in science and criticism, it would be more profitable to say that while criticism involves the use of logic and scientific method, it must go far beyond their capacities if it is to do its proper job. Though responsible to the formal rules of reasoning, and though in its own way empirical, criticism must initiate its chief functions in an area where these simplified calculi stop, for the models of logic and of scientific method achieve their extraordinary efficacy and their diverse modes of certainty by the device of systematically excluding just those features of experience that, humanly speaking, matter most. Inevitably, therefore, when critical discourse engages with its objects, it is controlled in considerable part by norms that we call good sense, sagacity, tact, sensibility, taste. These are terms by which we indicate that, though we are operating in a region where the rules are uncodified and elusive and there is room for the play of irreducible temperamental differences, yet decisions and judgments are not arbitrary, but are subject to broad criteria such as coherent-incoherent, adequate-omissive, penetrating-silly, just-distorting, revealing-obfuscatory, disinterested-partisan, better-worse. Although such a mode of discourse is rarely capable of rigidly conclusive arguments, it possesses just the kind of rationality it needs to achieve its own purposes . . .

To this I would only add that it may even be a mistake to suggest that there are, in addition to these broad general criteria, *any* illuminatingly codifiable rules or principles governing either critical practice in general or the practice of individual critics: perhaps the point is not that the rules are "uncodified and elusive" but that they are not there at all. But this is a matter I have dealt with at length elsewhere and cannot go into here.[5]

By absorbing the current philosophical literature on aesthetics and examining it in the light of his own wide and invaluable experience as a critic and historian of criticism, Abrams has produced a model of interdisciplinary work. His achievement is personally admirable, for one cannot think of many established professors of literature, their reputations made and secure, who would bother to "get up" a more or less foreign body of thought and to integrate it, rigorously and scrupulously, with what they already know. And it is an intellectually

[5] See Chapter 3 of my *Semantics, Linguistics, and Criticism* (Random House, 1972).

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important achievement as well, because of the light it sheds on the ostensible subject of this book, the whole vexed question of literary theory.

To generalize illuminatingly is always difficult. Therefore if you believe that to theorize about literature is to say something general and illuminating about it, it would seem natural to assume that writing good literary theory might be even more difficult than writing well about a particular literary work or writer or period. To go from the latter sort of job to the former would thus seem to require a concentration, not a relaxation, of powers. Yet what we have seen to be true of most of this book is true of most literary theory written by teachers of literature: when men who have been trained to write about works and writers and periods turn to theorizing, they relax. The invitation to theorize is taken as an invitation to go on holiday and to engage in various forms of self-indulgence—to pontificate, to rhapsodize, to camp it up. Why should this be so? Why should reading Hartman on Wordsworth or Bloomfield on the seven deadly sins be so different from reading these same men once they have donned their theoretical hats?

Certainly part of the answer is that most of what passes for literary theory is not written out of a felt need to answer some genuine question so much as out of a general uneasiness about the intellectual status of the humanities, a sense that literary criticism and scholarship stand in need of some sort of justification, and that this can be achieved if it can be shown that humanists, like scientists, have theories. Even the title of *In Search of Literary Theory* suggests that there is something odd about what Abrams calls "the theoretical enterprise" as it relates to literature: people don't, after all, go in search of chemical or linguistic theory; they attempt to construct particular chemical or linguistic theories to explain particular bodies of facts. The relation of Boyle's law to the observed behavior of gases, or of transformational syntactic theory to the observed behavior of speakers of English or some other language, may not be as straightforward as those of us who are not philosophers of science are tempted to believe; but such relations are surely not as problematical as the relation of literary theory in general or of any known particular literary theory to the facts that literary scholars and critics encounter in their work. A sure sign of this dilemma is the fact that the most striking thing about all of these essays except for Abrams' and de Man's is a kind of centerlessness, a looseness of organization and seeming lack of purpose that is harder to show through selective quotation than their bad logic and embarrassing rhetoric. The particular examples often seem to have been chosen at random and the theories, such as they are, seem merely to have been drummed up for the occasion, to have been "gone in search of" for their own sake and for want of anything better. One is tempted (echoing the title of Abrams' essay) to ask: what's the use of literary theory if you have to go in search of it, if it doesn't grow naturally out of our

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dealings with literature in the way that scientific or quasi-scientific theories seem to grow—even in very primitive cultures, as Lévi-Strauss and others have shown—out of our ordinary dealings with the physical world?

It is Abrams' analysts who have recognized this impasse and attacked the problem from a new angle. Starting from the commonsense position that criticism is an autonomous and perfectly rational activity in no need of justification, they have abandoned the traditional notion that the task of literary theory is to furnish general truths about literature that will stand in roughly the same relation to our individual critical insights and judgments as scientific laws do to our observations of the physical world. Instead, they have increasingly turned their attention to critical discourse itself, to the logic of critical arguments and the functioning of the concepts central to criticism. Literary theory has for them become what has recently come to be called metacriticism: instead of telling critics what to do, it studies what they do. Though literary scholars and critics interested in theory have drawn heavily on recent continental philosophy, the ones on this side of the Atlantic have, to the best of my knowledge, tended to ignore Wittgenstein and the aesthetics written under his influence. Abrams' essay, taken together with the failure of almost all the rest of *In Search of Literary Theory,* makes it very clear that this has been a mistake. Perhaps the most important source of all that bad logic and embarrassing rhetoric is confusion and bewilderment about the intellectual status of criticism—about what sort of rationality it does or ought to possess. It is precisely here that the philosophers can be of help. "One great advantage of this current analysis," writes Abrams, "is that it recognizes a variety of linguistic procedures in criticism, in addition to verifiable descriptions of fact, which, while not demonstrably and exclusively true, are nonetheless in their diverse ways rational, valid, and profitable human pursuits." Abrams, in his long and distinguished series of books and essays, has never given any signs of needing this sort of help himself; but the eloquent and beautifully worked out concluding statement of his essay, quoted above, shows what literary people who do need it might find if they read what analytic philosophers have said about aesthetics and criticism. That the state of literary theory would certainly be a good deal healthier if they did so is the moral—albeit unintended—of this book.

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DAVID PAUL FUNT

A Note on Language and Silence

AMONG ALL THOSE IN THE WEST who since ancient times have profoundly considered the nature and function of language there have been two main types: those who wished to get into language, to go from silence to speech, from the unspoken or unspeakable, from the unarticulated or inarticulate, the brute and perhaps the brutal, the primal and perhaps the primitive, to that which has form, articulation, voice; and those who wished to get from speech to silence, from the too-much spoken to the speechless, from the over-formed to the unformed or pre-formed, the divided to the whole.

But the most powerful thinkers and the most enigmatic have been those who have sought to do both. Plato was one of these as was Spinoza, at once formalist and mystic. With regard to Wittgenstein we find the controversy still raging as to whether he was really interested in the analysis of language itself or rather simply in using it to finally dispose of language—to show once and for all its boundaries and its limitations and so to be free of it in order to commune more directly with the Truth. Count Alfred Korzybski, founder of General Semantics, the supposed science of meaning, was another—pursuing the study of language all his life in order to give us what Kenneth Burke calls "glimpses into an almost mystical cult of silence."

William H. Youngren, author of a rather fifties-ish academic treatise called *Semantics, Linguistics, and Criticism*,[1] clearly has no use for, and a considerable suspicion of silence. Now this attitude is based on his apparent disbelief that silent apprehension of being (an experience minutely described by many in both the Eastern and Western traditions) really exists—therefore his suspicion of anyone who displays what he calls "wide-eyed childlike openness." And this attitude, which he shares with many other academics, in turn rests on his apparent familiarity only with Western thought and within this only with the rather recent Anglo-American tradition with its generally inadequate and often self-contradictory descriptions of such states of non-verbal apprehension. Thus he cites Korzybski's follower Stuart Chase:

> This contact comes before language and cannot be spoken. The eye receives light-waves from the apple, but says nothing. This apple, any apple, any object or act, is on the nonverbal level. Here we see it as a cat sees it, quietly and without words. . . . Here is the base from which all our proud words rise—every last one of them—and to which they must constantly return and be refreshed.

[1] SEMANTICS, LINGUISTICS, AND CRITICISM, by *William H. Youngren*. Random House. $3.95 paperback.

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Even this timid expression of non-verbal apprehension Youngren refers to as an *allegorical* journey, unaware, it seems, that it is at least an attempt (though a failure) to describe a real experience. The failure here and in most of the writers from whom Youngren takes his knowledge in such things is the failure to go far enough, the failure to go beyond the subject-object split. Thus Chase misrepresents both the nature of language and that of non-verbal states. *Things* do not produce words for us, nor are words, on the whole, names for things. Language does not return to apples and such to "refresh" itself, but rather takes its sustenance from its own formal organization. On the other hand non-verbal apprehension of objects as Chase describes it is a self-contradictory idea and thus inspires mistrust, even when the specific contradiction involved is not understood. For by the time the apple is an apple man has already traced his figure upon the world. And whether he voices this figure or not the primal writing (what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls *archi-écriture*) has been inscribed and the silence has been broken. But the journey back is no more allegorical than the journey here. I meditate upon the candle-flame, but silence only ensues when I no longer make any difference between the candle-flame and myself, when I experience the candle-flame as I experience myself. To say that there is no silent apprehension of *objects* is not to say that there is no silent apprehension of being. Chuang Tzu writes:

> So it is that to place oneself in subjective relation with externals, without consciousness of their objectivity—this is Tao. But to wear out one's intellect in an obstinate adherence to the individuality of things, not recognizing the fact that all things are one—this is called *Three in the Morning*. "What is *Three in the Morning*?" asked Tze Yu. "A keeper of monkeys," replied Tze Ch'i, "said with regard to their rations of chestnuts that each monkey was to have three in the morning and four at night. But at this the monkeys were very angry, so the keeper said they might have four in the morning and three at night, with which arrangement they were all well pleased."

Thus from a faulty analysis of experience, Youngren has learned to distrust experience and particularly to disbelieve that anyone's ideas are really related to his own experience of the world (for this is in fact rarely true in academic circles). Yet this is precisely where the great human problem—upon which Youngren never touches—lies: where silence is embodied in speech, world in language; and where they begin to be disembodied again. And so Youngren sees writers as constantly and rather mechanically prey to *views* and he gives us a lengthy and laborious and rather indiscriminate account of many different people's *views* (Korzybski, Chase, Hayakawa, Bloomfield, Saussure, Chomsky, Fodor, Katz, Richards, Leavis, etc.) and devotes himself to determining which *views* come from or go with which other *views*. But at no point does he create for us an intellectual *experience*. Small wonder, then, that some come to prefer silence.

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JAMES P. DEGNAN

Ecological Overkill[1]

UPON ASSUMING THE EDITORSHIP of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* about two years ago, William Bronson—one of the shrewdest and most able conservation writers and editors in the nation—laid down an editorial law to his potential contributors, which went something like this: I—and I think most people interested in conservation—am fed up with articles on the environment that do little more than decry, deplore and describe. I am tired of merely *hearing about* the criminal outrages of the air and water polluters, of the sea lion slaughterers, of the redwood destroyers. I know, and most people know, that the environment is in a hell of a shape. What I want to know—and what most people want to know—is what can be done about it? So, from now on, writers for the *Bulletin* can decry and deplore as much as they wish, but they must also provide a solution for whatever it is they are decrying and deploring; and by solution I mean a real solution—a course of action, if you will, political or otherwise—not merely some sort of philosophical maundering.

That I agree with Mr. Bronson explains in part why I find Professor Rene Dubos' *A God Within* predictable and tedious. I have, in the past ten years or so, read far too many books like it, books filled with what Mr. Bronson would call philosophical maundering; books filled with "big ideas" expressed in Charles Reichian, cotton-candy prose; books filled with unrealistic, often unintelligible solutions to real, intelligible problems. How do we solve our many and critical environmental problems? How do we end the criminal despoliation of nature, the irresponsible destruction of irreplaceable natural resources? "We must learn," says Professor Dubos, "to cultivate the positive values that exist in man's nature and in the external world." Or, again to quote Professor Dubos, "Man must learn to relate his innate genius to the spirit of the place in which he lives." Or, once more, we must stop concerning ourselves with "avoiding dangers" and concern ourselves with "the creation of new, positive values through the development of environmental and human potentialities." Besides moving me to scale the nearest convenient wall, such prose moves me to ask that simple question that people like Professor Dubos never get around to answering: *How?*

To illustrate further the cotton-candy quality of Professor Dubos' thinking in *A God Within* there is no better example than his attitude toward the expenditure of billions of dollars by the United States on

[1] A GOD WITHIN, by *Rene Dubos*. Scribners. $8.95. THE DOOMSDAY SYNDROME, by *John Maddox*. McGraw-Hill. $6.95. THE ENERGY CRISIS, by *Lawrence Rocks* and *Richard P. Runyon*. Crown. $5.95. THE LAST PLAY, by *James Ridgeway*. Dutton. $10.00.

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the manned space program—an expenditure that could and should have been used to solve many, if not most, of our major environmental problems. "It was worth the many billions of dollars spent on the manned space program," according to Professor Dubos, because the program enabled us "to obtain further evidence that the earth is unique in the solar system by virtue of the sensuous appeal it derives from its green and blue mantle. . . ."

Defenders of *A God Within* may argue that the book's main intention is not so much to give answers to environmental problems as to present a history of how various of the world's peoples—having discovered "the god within" themselves—have solved their environmental problems, have, for instance, combined nature and technology to the benefit of both. To this I can only respond that I still find the book predictable and tedious because I've read so many books that do the same job much better. *A God Within* seems to me little more than a sumary of information already popularized in works by people like Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, Joseph Wood Krutch, John Muir, Jane Jacobs, Joseph Campbell, Frank Lloyd Wright and others. I admit to being impressed by the book's erudition and entertained by certain of its many quotations—e.g., Horace Walpole's remark that the "French can never have as beautiful a landscape as ours (the English) til they have as bad a climate"—but, on the whole, the book comes across to me as something resembling a glorified student term paper.

Unlike Professor Dubos' book, Mr. John Maddox's *The Doomsday Syndrome* has the virtue of being somewhat original; unfortunately, it lacks the virtue of being completely truthful. Perturbed by the constant harping of "prophets of environmental doom"—e.g., of conservationists such as Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, Barry Commoner and others—Mr. Maddox attempts to show that such people have grossly exaggerated the various threats to and the parlous condition of our world environment. Now I don't mind confessing a kind of sympathy for Mr. Maddox's intention. There are many true believing environmentalists of whom I am thoroughly sick. The very sight of Ralph Nader's humorless, self-righteous face on television is enough to send me into hysterical cheers for Union Oil and General Motors. How, I constantly wonder, can anyone be so consistently right about so many things? The difference, I think, between me and Mr. Maddox is that while I am thoroughly uncomfortable with the style of the Nader types—Paul Ehrlich is a prime example—I am willing to admit that, more often than not, they *are* right; that what they have to say, no matter how annoying its tone, holds up in rational debate.

Someone, Schopenhauer, I believe, once said that "the cause of all bad writing is the striving to be thought a genius." Change that slightly to read, "to be thought original," and we have a description of Mr. Maddox's major weakness; for it is his preoccupation with being original at all costs, with writing a "different kind" of environ-

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mental book, that causes him to write badly, i.e., to say some remarkably silly things. For example, "Environmental pollution is not a threat but a demonstration of the need for laws and taxes." Mr. Maddox obviously means that *because* of the threat of environmental pollution we need new laws and taxes to prevent such pollution; but to say *that* would hardly be original. Or, to quote him again, we can save the environment, "if we devote our energies to solving our problems, rather than wasting them away by scaring people and convincing ourselves that the human race is doomed." The implication here, of course, is that if people like Commoner and Nader and Ehrlich and David Brower (whose name Mr. Maddox consistently misspells as "Brewer") would only shut up and go away, all our environmental problems, somehow, would go away with them. It hardly needs saying, but I'll say it anyway, that were it not for conservationists like the above named, were it not for their "scaring" both the people and the politicians, our environment—hardly in an ideal shape today—would be in far worse condition. That any of these conservationists spends his time doing nothing but "convincing" the human race that it's "doomed" is simply nonsense. That certain conservationists like Ehrlich have said that the human race *might be* doomed unless it takes actions to prevent that doom may be true. But there is a great distinction between saying that the human race *might be doomed* and that it *is* doomed. Mr. Maddox, however, is apparently not a great one for apprehending and articulating distinctions.

Besides misrepresenting the conservationists he attacks, Mr. Maddox bases his rosy outlook concerning the state of the environment on some highly dubious reasoning. Why, for example, he wants to know, should Americans be so upset about air pollution? Don't we know that in our major cities "air pollution has been declining for well over a decade?" Granting the truth of Mr. Maddox's statement, we can conclude, I suppose, that at the rate of decline he mentions, Los Angeles should have breathable air in about 300 years or so. Now this is a conclusion which may hearten Mr. Maddox, but it is hardly designed to make environmental optimists out of the current residents of Los Angeles and environs. And why, wonders Mr. Maddox, are we so concerned about exhausting our natural resources—copper, for instance? "If copper becomes scarce or merely expensive, aluminum will have to be used instead," he tells us. More objective environmentalists—e.g., Lawrence Rocks and Richard P. Runyon in their book *The Energy Crisis*—are not so sanguine as Mr. Maddox. World reserves of aluminum, *The Energy Crisis* informs us, "are about 1,000 million tons. . . only about five times the reserves of copper." And the "electric needs of the future . . . will easily make aluminum just as short-lived as copper is at present."

In its objectivity and lack of axe grinding, *The Energy Crisis* provides an excellent counter to *The Doomsday Syndrome*. Based on facts, rather than on Maddox's cheery speculations, *The Energy Crisis,*

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demonstrates that there is, indeed, an urgent and critical shortage of the natural resources necessary to supply the world's increasing demand for energy. Referring to fossil fuels—the fuels that produce the oil, gas and coal we depend on as our major energy sources—the authors of *The Energy Crisis* remind us that these fuels are non-renewable and that in a single year we consume more of them than it took "nature a million years to create." The most optimistic estimate of how long free world oil reserves will hold out, according to *The Energy Crisis,* is thirty-five years. And, as for quixotic notions of alternate power sources—e.g., solar energy and geothermal energy—the authors demonstrate that we lack both the money and, much more important, the technology necessary to make these sources practical solutions to solving the energy crisis, at least within the next fifty years. According to *The Energy Crisis,* there is but one desirable and feasible solution: an all-out government effort to develop atomic energy supplied by fusion plants. Unlike the atomic fission plants—which we have at present—fusion plants would presumably be safe. Rather than giving off the dangerous radioactive wastes of the fission plant, the fusion plant would give off helium, a harmless gas. Further, unlike the fission plant, powered by uranium—a material that not only produces dangerous wastes but, like fossil fuels, will relatively soon be exhausted from the earth—the fusion plant would be powered by deuterium (an isotope of hydrogen found in water), the reserves of which, according to *The Energy Crisis,* would serve man "for more than a billion years." Illustrating the potential of deuterium, the authors point out that "The deuterium in one gallon of water would yield the energy equivalent of 300 gallons of gasoline, and can be extracted for a few pennies." How much money would it take for the government to make the all-out effort necessary to develop fusion power? According to the authors of *The Energy Crisis,* "about $1 billion through 1977." That the government will spend this money, however, is doubtful. After all, the authors remind us, the government is committed to spending "$5 billion on a space station over the next five years."

Another objective and interesting book devoted to the energy crisis is James Ridgeway's *The Last Play.* Unlike *The Energy Crisis,* however, Mr. Ridgeway's book is more interested in the political than in the scientific aspects of the crisis. Mr. Ridgeway's thesis is simple and direct: An international cartel of oil companies (Jersey Standard, Shell, Gulf, California Standard, Mobil, Texaco, and British Petroleum) who control the oil of the free world are now, through such means as buying up the major coal companies and entering the nuclear industry, creating a monopoly of energy the results of which are "stark and simple: these energy companies plan to exhaust one fossil fuel after another, assuring the highest possible profits as fuels grow scarcer."

Mr. Ridgeway points out that the oil companies, aided by govern-

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ment subsidies—e.g., various tax incentives—are "bleeding the energy rich sections of the United States making millions of dollars in profits for the absentee landlords while the people of these areas grow steadily poorer." This, he contends, is what has happened in Appalachia, and it is what may well happen in the states of the Far West (for instance, in the coal and shale oil regions soon to be exploited), in Canada, and in the Arctic regions as well.

As for the state and federal regulatory agencies that are supposed to regulate the oil industry—the Federal Power Commission, for example—they are, by Mr. Ridgeway's account, dominated by individuals sympathetic, not to the average taxpayer, whom they are supposed to represent—but to the oil interests. The FPC, for example, should obviously—through independent surveys—know precisely what our energy reserves, e.g., our gas and oil reserves, are. But the appalling fact is, according to Ridgeway, that the FPC gets its information about these reserves *from* the oil companies. The oil companies, therefore, unchallenged by an independent agency possessed of the necessary facts, are in the enviable position of being able to create a gasoline or oil shortage, if such a situation suits their needs. Horror stories of this sort abound in *The Last Play*. Mr. Ridgeway tells of Gulf Oil which, because of government subsidies, paid, on enormous profits, only 1.8% in taxes last year, while the average citizen paid 20%. And he tells of the government allowing Shell Oil to build its new, huge and potentially dangerous (as oil spillers) tankers merely on Shell's *word* that the tankers will be safe. Mr. Ridgeway also reminds us that a major reason why we are having an energy crisis, a major reason why we have failed to develop alternate sources of power—e.g., solar energy, geothermal energy, nuclear power by fusion—is that the oil interests, with their tremendously powerful political lobbies, have consistently opposed adequate government spending on the research and development of such alternate power sources.

What can be done to check the international cartel of oil and energy corporations? Among other things, Ridgeway suggests the creation of independent government agencies that would—through independent surveys—supply the people with the real facts about our energy reserves and needs. Ridgeway also suggests the creation of a national energy commission, a commission that would operate from what America now sadly lacks—an authentically tough national energy policy. And he further suggests the creation of elected regional energy planning boards, that would determine overall regional energy needs and policies.

Whether Mr. Ridgeway's plans—and the above are only a few—are workable or even desirable, I'm not sure. I am sure, however, after reading *The Last Play,* that new and drastic plans, quickly implemented, are necessary if we are to achieve anything resembling a sane control and use of the energy sources that remain and the new ones that may be developed.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Poetry Matters

In a world bursting with sin and sorrow our monstrous nation has been for some time now holding stage front and center. Not content with perpetrating tragedy in Southeast Asia, we foul up lyric poetry in a mess of Skylab while the Nixon Administration is so richly inventive in its language and morality that even Philip Roth (in *Our Gang*) fails to live up to it. With Watergate we have evolved, like Shakespeare, a new form called tragi-comedy in a doubtless vain attempt at generic adequacy. Meanwhile the novel has never been healthier. Recovering from its disabling preoccupation with oh-so-black humor in the late sixties, it seems now to be accommodating all sorts of interesting practitioners unafraid to take on Washington politics (Tom Wicker) or stealing cars in Detroit (Theodore Weesner) or gambling at the racetrack and tables (James Guetti). If purely invented actions aren't enough there is always Mailer or Buckley or Vidal to amuse us. And what then of lyric poetry—still hanging on by the fingernails? In Western Massachusetts the answer is yes, barely: undergraduates fiddle about with moving words around in different combinations, hoping the result will be deep and mysterious; a clever manipulator like John Ashbery has a certain following among the avant-garde; for those who insist that poetry have something to do with life there are the riches of Lowell, Jarrell, Larkin, Merrill we have only begun to explore. But there is as usual almost no chance that a reasonably intelligent adult, academic or not, would spend any time with a volume of poems; [1] while the only place outside a classroom you might expect to hear a conversation about poetry would be where two or three contemporary poets are gathered together, swapping information about who got the latest award or who's going to Iowa Workshop next.

Consider two poems:

Rain

All day I spent
with water. I rained
nasturtiums, I rained
hearts of mushrooms, my
eyes were cocktail waitresses
weeping into avocado dip—there
are days frequently moaning

[1] Such inattention is encouraged by our local bookstore which stocked one copy of Bollingen prize-winning James Merrill's *Braving the Elements*, sold it, then ordered no more. And with Merrill an alumnus of the college!

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the slow rivers are cheap white bread
the slow rivers are boiled tomatoes
the slow rivers are broad veins
in my teeth, my teeth without tears
the slow rivers fondle themselves
like candle drippings

We move into each other, gauze
without wounds, soaking up
the blood & water of our lives.

Song of Presence

I let go of my darkness I have grieved there & been lost
I lay down in greenshining grasses smelling of them & rolling
in them
I wake up in the dew where innumerable worlds orient &
balance
the sun recurring in each drop rounded by the light
Earth rounded by our star's radiance
I wake up to the water wake up light dew grass &
stones
wake eyes & ears wake the pink cloud of my bones
& old loves & new fulfill my spirit's waking
I wake up, Lord
I wake up to this blazing coat of joys
no grief destroys

They are typical (selected because short enough to quote) performances from new volumes by two poets about age thirty.[2] Terry Stokes and William Pitt Root have won prizes, taught writing in colleges, had enough of their work accepted so that they can be published by two of the most respectable houses in New York. And their poetic personalities are quite different: Stokes is a big joker, calls poems "The Rump Roast & What Happened" or "Travis, The Kid Was All Heart" (". . . He liked to fuck sheep & /eat spiders. When he slept, he farted toads."); while Root is all solemnity and reverence a yard wide, calls his poems "Reckonings" and "Songs from the Rim of the Wheel Whose Center is Everywhere," uses epigraphs from Robert Duncan and W. S. Merwin, is prone to utterances such as "I am empty/ given to a silence/ I despise and need" or "So I hang from my bones /like rotten fruit, bleeding/ and sweet." But they are alike in two respects: both reveal a fondness for the ampersand & both are good at accepting themselves, nature, spirit, & whatever else comes down the pike. How, after Whitman, either of these poets can pre-

[2] CRIMES OF PASSION, by *Terry Stokes*. Alfred A. Knopf. $4.95/$1.95. STRIKING THE DARK AIR FOR MUSIC, by *William Pitt Root*. Atheneum. $3.95.

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sume to bring off so painlessly and frequently attitudes of acceptance is a question their works don't address, perhaps are not aware of. In Root's case this seems a pity, since his new volume has eight poems at the beginning, before he begins striking the dark air for music, which are often firmly in touch with childhood places and natural happenings and whose poetic tone is serious and assured. But the volume gets evermore vatic and fuzzily pious until he is as hard to take seriously as Terry Stokes, banging around with those hearts of mushrooms, nasturtiums and his eyes weeping into avocado dip.

Many words have been said about how modern poetry was hampered so long by its straining after wit, paradox, a complexly intellectual manner of statement. But at the moment it's the poetry of openness, of liberation, the "naked poetry" of one recent anthology title, that deserves some ironic criticism. James Wright—who might figure along with Robert Bly, Mark Strand and others (like William Pitt Root) to stand for such receptive and humble openness toward experience—has produced, hard on the heels of his already collected poems, a new volume filled with questions like "What is going to happen when we both die?" or "What have I got to do" or "What are you going to do? Be kind? Kill?/Die?" [3] The poet keeps confessing that he loves life and that other people should love their life too and that he is all ah shucks and just an ordinary guy:

> No, I ain't much.
> The one tongue I can write in
> Is my Ohioan.
> There, most people are poor.
> I thought I could not stand it
> To go home any more,
> Yet I go home, every year,
> To calm down my wild mother,
> And talk long with my brother.
> (from "To the Creature of the Creation")

As far as the music of poetry goes, to say nothing of the presence of interesting ideas about life and love and death, Wright's poetry indeed ain't much. He tries to get by on personality, on confessional verse that whether it's naive or mock-naive is in neither case arresting or disturbing. Maybe this is what *The New York Times* meant when they urged the Bollingen Prize awarders to look past Yale, out to the West where men are men and where more earthy poetry, in touch with life, gets written. But Wright's labored attempts to be natural only succeed in making him sound twice as artificial as the eastern university wit busily dialectizing out a clever sonnet.

Let us now praise eastern university wits when they write sonnets and others as well as Howard Nemerov does in his new collection.[4]

[3] TWO CITIZENS, by *James Wright*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $6.95.

[4] GNOMES AND OCCASIONS, by *Howard Nemerov*. University of Chicago Press. $5.95.

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"Thirtieth Anniversary Report of the Class of '41" is a poem I once would have termed merely clever:

> We who survived the war and took to wife
> And sired the kids and made the decent living,
> And piecemeal furnished forth the finished life
> Not by grand theft so much as petty thieving—
>
> Who had the routine middle-aged affair
> And made our beds and had to lie in them
> This way or that because the beds were there,
> And turned our bile and choler in for phlegm—
>
> Who saw grandparents, parents, to the vault
> And wives and selves grow wrinkled, grey and fat
> And children through their acne and revolt
> And told the analyst about all that—
>
> Are done with it. What is there to discuss?
> There's nothing left for us to say to us.

But it now seems to me just and justified, even though it scans and rhymes too. Nemerov, who often sounds like Frost in his two-liners: "Crewcut et Ux. have raised their long haired pup:/ Samson is shorn, and Absalom's hung up" ("History of Hair from World War II to the Present") also, like Frost's Oven Bird, knows in singing not to sing. So when he's asked to produce a poem about the Vietnam War it begins:

> Here is Joe Blow the poet
> Sitting before the console of the giant instrument
> That meditates his spirit to the world

Joe Blow eventually begins his Vietnam poem with "O"; Nemerov's is titled "On Being Asked for a Peace Poem." There are ambitious, complicated arguments in "Beginner's Guide," "The World as Breughel Imagined it" and "Lines and Circularities," but I would like to quote entire a poem with an idea that has given me both intellectual and musical pleasure, I hope not merely because this review is being written on a quiet campus a few days after commencement fuss has subsided:

> Across the trampled, program-littered grass
> A thousand yellow chairs have broken ranks
> Before the ramrod silver microphone
> That stands there on the platform unaddressed

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And finished with the clichés of command.

O ceremony, ceremony! Let
Expression be the mere formality
The day demands; for emptiness alone
Has generality enough to send
Yet one more generation to the world,

And platitudes become the things they are
By being uninformative and true:
The words that for the hundreth time today
Bounced off the sunlit stone into the past
Have made the silence deeper by degrees.
("After Commencement")

Unlike Frost's, Nemerov's poetry seldom commits organized violence upon language; the words don't dance around, they say what they mean without ever rising to urgency (the play on "degrees" is rather weary). But at their best they produce gentle shocks of mild surprise that carry to the heart and that make this modest volume one of the real satisfactions of the quarter.

As was Dannie Abse's.[5] Its long title poem felt a bit artificial and over-extended, but the solid core of this book is found in a number of poems about ordinary life, driving the M4 back to South Wales to visit an eighty-year-old mother, kissing your youngest child on returning home from that journey, summing up your life at 3.30 a.m. on January 1st, getting your diary and address book up-to-date, sorting out your attitudes toward an anti-Vietnam demonstration. Dannie Abse, like all good Welshmen, cares about, because he is endowed with, the singing voice and the sense of humor, as in "Miss Book World":

We, the judges, a literary lot,
peep-tom legitimately at these beauties,
give marks for legs and breasts, make remarks
low or pompous like most celebrities;
not that we are, but they imagine us so
who parade blatantly as camera-lights flash
crazily for a glossy page and cash.

Perhaps some girls entered for a giggle,
but all walk slave-like in this ritual fuss
of unfunny compère, funny applause
spotlit dream-girls displayed, a harem for us;
not that they are, but we imagine them so,
with Miss Book World herself just barely flawed,
almost perfect woman, almost perfect fraud.

[5] FUNLAND AND OTHER POEMS, by *Dannie Abse*. Oxford University Press. $5.95.

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The illusion over, half the contestants
still fancy themselves in their knock-out pose,
while we literati return to the real
world of fancy, great poetry and prose;
not that it is, but we imagine it so,
great vacant visions in which we delight,
as if we see the stars not only at night.

All worked out neatly, true; but how difficult to do! At least I imagine it so and was charmed by the poised, attractive spirit of these poems. Like Nemerov's, it's not poetry that will change anybody's life, and witty resignations and compromises may have had their day, but at least Abse knows how far he can let a poem take him and is willing to imagine the sort of listener I was happy to be. *Funland* is at least a couple of notches above Abse's previous *Selected Poems*—a good indication for his future.

So as not to be accused of praising only clever poets I would single out Richard Hugo as a man who does not worry much, or so it seems, over the appearance and shape of individual poems.[6] His energy level is pretty high and relatively unvaried, and it's possible to tire after you read through a chunk of his work; but he's fortunate in having a country to write about—Montana—that he knows and that we (how cozy that "we"!) don't. Philipsburg looks as if it could be known for what it is:

The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.

But when Hugo's eyes take visionary possession of land or a townscape, they make it his and our own in ways that touch and disturb:

Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?
Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Philipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?
("Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg")

[6] THE LADY IN KICKING HORSE RESERVOIR, by *Richard Hugo*. W. W. Norton & Co. $6.95.

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Say no to yourself, the poet goes on to advise. I find myself often saying yes to Hugo's rhetoric, made to participate in responsive gesture to the beckonings and directives of his voice. I'm uneasy about the form, or lack of form, to many of these poems; but the appealing boldness of his obsessions makes that uneasiness livable with.

I have thought twice about the wisdom and justice of considering in a group three new volumes of poetry by women, since it is a shade depressing to put yourself in the position of saying, now here are the women poets, look how they talk.[7] But they do talk differently from the poised urbane confidences of Nemerov or Abse. There was that old play called *No Time for Comedy,* and it does seem as if no serious woman (and she clearly *has* to be serious in 1973) is inclined toward putting herself on witty display or relaxing into resigned acceptance of a limited life. Still it turns out that poems can be written by women out of something more than blood, sweat and anger, or so insists a tiny Eakins Press volume of Jane Mayhall's poems. She is nasty, sharp, slangy, gets much of her material from magazines and TV junk; she also cares about the individual figure of a poem, for example "Insanity is Too Simple":

> Insanity is too simple.
> To crazy people, everything
> has a flaw, or looks horrible,
> clear-bad, or is out to get them.
> The paranoid is so certain, you
> could call him stable, if the joke
> appeals to you. It is sanity
> that is complicated, seeing
> the world as made of love, illogic
> treading out its criss-cross
> patterns. What brain can hold
> a rainbow? What attitude survive
> the facts? No crack-up wants to
> accept life's not exact, but living
> on the edge. The impossible, un-
> determined, the pouring brims
> of sanity.

I encountered sanity in these small but always aggressively pointed poems, one of which, "The Raw, Hot Feeling," is twenty-two lines of assertions:

> Soap is still better than detergents,
> exercise is still better than sleeping pills,

[7] GIVERS & TAKERS 2, by *Jane Mayhall.* The Eakins Press. $4.95. POWER POLITICS, by *Margaret Atwood.* Harper & Row. $5.95. DIVING INTO THE WRECK, by *Adrienne Rich.* W. W. Norton & Co. $5.95.

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love is still better than sex machines,
courtesy is still better than murder,
intelligence is still better than psychiatric labels, . . .

I like this way of standing up for Old Values in a poem:" Indictments, diatribes, satires," as the blurb has it, they are also art. To read Jane Mayhall you need suspend none of your normal intelligence nor make lots of concessions, allowances and reservations. She should be read a good deal more than I assume she is.

Margaret Atwood's wit is darker, less public than Jan Mayhall's, and I'm not even sure how much I like *Power Politics* or whether I can quote convincingly from it to suggest its quality. The title is a harsh joke since these poems are about an "I" and her lover, seen through various moods, places and postures. Miss Atwood has a revealing note on the jacket in which she begins to lay out the themes of the book, then interrupts by insisting that the actual process of writing poems has nothing to do with "themes": "It's a lot more like walking in the dark; you move one step at a time, you depend on sound and touch, and you can't see where you're going, though you may guess." This remark well describes the experimental character of her poems and puts it up to the reader similarly to move along in the dark, depending on the sound and touch of language:

A different room, this month
a worse one, where your
body with head
attached and my head with
body attached coincide briefly

I want questions and you want
only answers, but the building
is warming up, there is not much

time and time is not
fast enough for us any
more, the building sweeps
away, we are off course, we
separate, we hurtle towards each other
at the speed of sound, everything roars

we collide sightlessly and
fall, the pieces of us
mixed as disaster
and hit the pavement of this room
in a blur of silver fragments

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Love in these poems is collision, obsession, disaster, wreckage. Love is surreal, and language in order to perform up to it has always to be making and unmaking itself. Much of the book is fragmentary, some of it pretentious, but one gets the distinct feeling that Margaret Atwood knows what she is talking about, that her poems, like Eliot's, truly germinate in an "obscure impulse" and have no choice but to work themselves out. The poetry does not matter.

Adrienne Rich's poetry has increasingly taken on more of the public world, the situation of being a woman, of living through late-sixties disasters of various sorts. There is the requisite amount of bloodiness in these "Poems 1971-1972": ". . . Sometimes every/aperture of my body/ leaks blood. I don't know whether/ to pretend that this is natural"—lines that are not immune to ironic reflection on the reader's part. Or "My hands, stick in a new way./Menstrual blood/ seeming to leak from your side." The pretentious effort from which these latter lines come is titled "The Phenomenology of Anger," combining the latest in philosophic chic with the required contemporary womanly virtue. It is hard to know what to do when the poet confides that "For weeks now a rage/ has possessed my body, driving/ now out upon men and women/ now inward upon myself"—since when Adrienne Rich assures us she's in anger or tears it has an odd way of making me feel neither tearful nor angry. On the back of the book is a list of Miss Rich's awards: Yale Series of Younger Poets, Ridgley Torrence Memorial, National Book Award finalist, two Guggenheims, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, an Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship. That is to say, she has been well-treated to the extent where there may be some difficulty in bringing off a poem that cries out "From the Prison House" where we are directed to observe "the fingers of the policewoman/searching the cunt of the young prostitute." She is the Woman, she suffered, she was there—such is the Whitman-like claim; but I do not see that her use of the language justifies it, though she is a perfect preacher to the converted. Perhaps the most interesting and egregious instance of this preaching comes in a poem called "Rape" which addresses a "you," who, raped, must deal with a "cop who is both prowler and father." The poem's last four stanzas follows:

> And so, when the time comes you have to turn to him,
> the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
> your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
> to him, you are guilty of the crime
> of having been forced.
>
> And you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the family
> whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,
> his hand types out the details

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and he wants them all
but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best.

You hardly know him but now he thinks he knows you:
he has taken down your worst moment
on a machine and filed it in a file.
He knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined;
he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted.

He has access to machinery that could get you put away;
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
your details sound like a portrait of your confessor,
will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?

How we respond to this involves our deepest beliefs about the nature of poetry. It is a poem that, with a little polish added, could have been written by a small committee composed of Germaine Greer, Susan Brownmiller and Ti-Grace Atkinson. Its heavy, knowing tone; its "you, woman" air of really being in on everything; its absolute willingness to put forth The Cop (whose eyes of course narrow and glisten) as an accurate portrait of the way life is; its sensationalistic, flashy hot-bit about the maniac's sperm greasing the thighs—all these bespeak a capitulation to ideologic simplification that somebody who goes to poetry for exactly *not* that can only deplore. Cop-Maniac-Man: really, the poem says, aren't they the same, sister? But poetry is supposed to preserve differences, make distinctions, be clear instead of simple. Or so I assumed. Adrienne Rich's truest mode is evident in two poems in this volume—"For the Dead" and "From a Survivor"—which are private, toneless, floating, unpunctuated; in which the voice speaks out, breaks off, picks itself up again, tries to get something said, makes us push toward though never lets us reach the experience that is sadly back there somewhere behind the poem. I am aware that very different, certainly more favorable accounts of her volume will have been given by the time this one is published. But I would hold that whatever else poetry gives us it must, in Stevens' terms, give Pleasure. These poems do not give pleasure.

A few comments on some specialties and sports by established figures.[8] Philip Larkin's Oxford anthology of this century's English verse has been fiercely but justly criticized in England by Donald Davie and Ian Hamilton. Reading through it is a frustrating experience for

[8] THE OXFORD BOOK OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH VERSE, chosen by *Philip Larkin*, Clarendon Press; Oxford. $12.50. POEMS 1970-72, by *Robert Graves*. Doubleday & Company. $5.95. OPPOSITES, by *Richard Wilbur*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $3.75. TOWN AND COUNTRY MATTERS, by *John Hollander*. David R. Godine. $6.95. Mention should be made of *A Closer Look at Ariel*, by Nancy Hunter Steiner. (Harper's Magazine Press. $5.00); a memoir of Sylvia Plath by her college roommate. This wholly decent account has a sensitive introduction by George Stade.

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the reasons these critics point out: you never know whether a poem is being included because Larkin thinks it's a good poem, or because "the age" found something worthy in it, or a little bit of both. So when, for example, six pages are taken up with a pasteboard thing by Dame Edith Sitwell called "The Shadow of Cain" (dedicated, why not, to C. M. Bowra) and when her total page space is not only greater than moderns like Davie and Larkin himself (not well represented here!) or Charles Tomlinson (a mere two short poems) but ancients like Edwin Muir and William Empson, then something is distinctly odd. The anthology interests and stimulates by its quaintness, by the simple fact that there are a lot of poems, particularly Georgian ones, we didn't know existed. But not many of them are returnable to, I would guess. As for major figures, the selection from Yeats is totally predictable, as if Larkin didn't have any choice in the matter at all (could he care less about Yeats?); that from Lawrence simply perverse and inadequate (no "Wild Common" nor "Hymn to Priapus" nor "Snake" nor "Piano"). Larkin is good on Auden and Graves and, as to be expected, marvelous on Sir John Betjeman. But on the whole it is as maddening a book, and will probably hang around as long, irritating people, as Yeats's anthology to which it is the successor.

No poem from Robert Graves's latest collection will find its way into anthologies or add anything significant to our appreciation of him. Still, just a short reminder that the hand has not lost its touch:

Growing Pains

My earliest love, that stabbed and lacerated,
Must I accept it as it seemed then—
Although still closely documented, dated
And even irreversibly annotated
By your own honest pen?

Love never lies, even when it most enlarges
Dimensions, griefs, or charges,
But, come what must, remains
Irrevocably true to its worst growing pains.

While for those who like the joker in Graves, as I do, here is "The Encounter":

Von Masoch met the Count de Sade
In Hell as he strode by
'Pray thrash me soundly, Count!' he begged.
His lordship made reply:

'What? Strike a lackey who *enjoys*
Great blows that bruise and scar?'

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'I love you, Count,' von Masoch sighed,
'So cruel to me you are.'

Everyone should memorize this in order to spruce up the shopworn joke.

Although Richard Wilbur has not been known primarily as a joker, he has recently committed a number of clever hits and published them in an attractive little volume. *Opposites* claims to have originated from the Wilbur supper table where instead of fighting about morality and society they fight about what's the opposite of this or that word. Being a poet, Dad was able to turn these arguments to imaginative use of the following sort:

What is the opposite of *actor*?
The answer's very simple: *tractor*.
I said that just because it rhymes,
As lazy poets do at times.

However, to be more exact,
An actor's one who likes to act
King Lear in some unlikely plot,
Pretending to be what he's not.

The opposite of *actor,* friend,
Is *someone who does not pretend,*
But is *himself,* like you and me.
I'm Romeo. Who might you be?

What saves these poems from coyness, lollipops for the kids, is, along with his usual brilliance of ear, Wilbur's jaunty and unsaccharine response to the pleasures and strangenesses of using words. He has also illustrated them with his own figure drawings which do not remind us of Rembrandt but are otherwise acceptably amusing. Good cover, good picture of poet on the back, not a bad $3.75's worth: What is the opposite of *two?/A lonely me, a lonely you.*/Something for every struggling couple to take to heart.

"Light Verse" brings back the fifties when somebody's volume of the stuff was always getting reviewed. But with the exception of James Merrill (in a poem like "The Summer People") I don't know an American poet better at turning out sophisticated, hard-nosed (but good-hearted too) social verse than John Hollander, and it ends up not feeling "light," like light whiskey, at all. This volume, published in 1972 in a handsome edition by David R. Godine, is made up of Erotica and Satirica, "translations and fresh creation" of "a world of classical urbanity" says the blurb. John Hollander's dirty mind is

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excellently displayed throughout, and Anne Hollander has provided appropriately feelthy and not so feelthy pictures as illustrations. The idea of setting out to be dirty and daring is a depressing one, but in fact these poems don't let themselves get locked into lubricious points. For me the best things in a never less than interesting collection are eighteen "Sonnets for Roseblush"—this sort of thing:

> I thought of turning you into a boy
> So that my queer friends, too, might feel the quick
> Of my longing when they read this, and the joy
> Of my having. But it's much too hard a trick
> Just as it is, to keep you breathing fast,
> Moving beneath me on this bed of paper.
> My lady is too volatile to last;
> How can I risk her substance to reshape her?
> Yes, that means you, sweet, I can feel you twist
> Against me still and freeze in a brief cry,
> My true deep secret that does not exist:
> Why should I break you out into a lie?
> No. Ed and Fred and Ted and Ike and Mike
> Will just have to imagine what it's like.

Liber Amorem Liberat, and there is a drawing of the lovers reading and writing while in other ways satisfactorily engaged. But the gem of the volume, and I would claim the best poem Hollander has ever written, is a long one called "New York," spun off from Juvenal, the friend "Rus" leaving town for good because living in the city has grown impossible, the poet staying behind to reflect on the meaning of living there. Written in strong couplets the verse twists and moves rapidly through the junk and glories of urban life. "Rus" sees through the whole thing as a sell:

> Across the park, the other Met is ill:
> You can find pots and pictures in it still
> I guess, among the crowds who are lured in
> Not by the touching bronze-age safety pin,
> The Dirck Bouts, or the Hellenistic head,
> Beauties and truths of the unending dead,
> But by the price-tag on the latest purchase.
> While guards now eye us warily, and search us
> For razors, car antennae, pots of grease
> With which mobs humanize a masterpiece,
> The Mammon of attendance figures stands,
> Rubbing his failing directorial hands.
> Dear Hoving! let him repossess with love
> Those parks he was a good commissioner of!

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Hoving as seen through Dr. Johnson seeing through Juvenal ("In full-blown dignity see Wolsey stand") or Pope ("In office here fair Cloacina stands,/And ministers to Jove with purest hands")—the poem is filled with eighteenth-century lines. Other institutions are similarly seen through and dispensed with by the exile. But after he leaves, the poet has his own fling at seeing through life in the country ("Dilapidated walls in cold Vermont") and eventually comes to a moving account of why he (Hollander in no disguise) will stay put to "see the ending out from where we should":

> With nothing working, services gone slack,
> Mushrooms on the abandoned subway track,
> Telephones silent between twelve and two,
> Thousands of cats reclaim an empty zoo.

He moves on to a lovely elegiac passage:

> West in Manhattan where the sun has set
> The elevator rises calmly yet
> In my dark tower, against the tower-dimmed sky
> Whose wide, old windows yield my narrower eye
> Images no revision can defeat: . . .
> Calm steam rising from manholes in the dark;
> Clean asphalt of an avenue; the spark
> Of gold in every mica window high
> On westward faces of the peaks. . .

and concludes wonderfully:

> Gardens? Lead me not home to them: a plain
> Of rooftops, gleaming after April rain
> In later sunlight, shines with Ceres' gold
> Sprung up, not ripped, from earth; gained as of old.
> Our losses are of gardens. We create
> A dense, sad city for our final state.

I have not come across any better lines than these recently. To take back my earlier words, "New York" is neither a speciality nor a sport, just an admirable piece of work.

Hollander's poem engages thoroughly and satisfactorily with a part of life in these United States, 1973. This chronicle will conclude with new work by the two American poets who over the past fifteen years have most fully explored possibilities, new feelings, dislocations, despairs in the self and in the republic: Ginsberg and Lowell.[9] Should

[9] THE FALL OF AMERICA, by *Allen Ginsberg*. City Lights. $2.50. FOR LIZZIE AND HARRIET, by *Robert Lowell*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $7.95 HISTORY, by *Robert Lowell*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $7.95. THE DOLPHIN, by *Robert Lowell*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $6.95.

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it not be declared that with the publication of *Howl* (1956) and *Life Studies* (1959) our poetry was indubitably changed and indispensably enriched? Before that, it now seems, there were the giants (Eliot, Pound, Williams) struggling with their long poems, and the veteran lyric craftsmen (Frost, Stevens) presenting us with many fine shorter ones. But beyond that—a handful of well-made, intelligent, quite respectable lyrics that, after taking an English course or two, one could produce dutiful analyses of and admire for their well-wrought shapes. Ginsberg and Lowell changed all that, thrusting upon us in their immensely different ways the poem as personal performance. Why should anybody talk about "the speaker" (as we used to say) of "Howl" or "Memories of West Street and Lepke," since Ginsberg and Lowell were there, up front, doing something other than constructing an elegant poem. How does one say that Lowell "goes too far" by bringing into a poem that bit about outdrinking the Rahvs in Greenwich Village; or that Ginsberg sometimes sounds tasteless and sentimental? As Kenneth Burke reminded us, Matthew Arnold's behavior would have been in bad taste if he tried to hang around on street corners with young toughs. *Whose* bad taste; *who* says they go too far? Over the years since those two volumes their authors have not let up on us, haven't been blocked as writers perhaps in part because they don't worry about creating Good Poems. They can't help themselves; life jumps into their heads and so they write.

As has been the case before, I find myself with little to add, in description, at least, to Helen Vendler's *New York Times* review of the new Ginsberg volume; yet I also surmise that her admiration for Ginsberg's work in the past, particularly his long poem "Kaddish" makes her less harsh than I would be on the silliness and bum writing that is found in much of *The Fall of America.* On sex Ginsberg is maudlin and hysterical; on Vietnam and pollution at home he says all the right things but doesn't do much more than *say* them. His world is filled with good guys and bad guys: Cleaver and Tim Leary hurrah; Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, Rusk boo. There is endless moaning about Neal Cassady, Jack, Gregory and the rest of that broken up old gang of his. As Mrs. Vendler says, all Ginsberg has left to do now is cross and recross the country, celebrating places, sights, smells and sounds while aging and waiting for death's inexorable doom. So this is a sad book, not much left of the cocky surreal humor of "A Supermarket in California" or "America" or "Poem Rocket." Ginsberg's "auto poesy" as he calls it seems often to have been written in the bumpy back seat of the car, dashed off on an envelope, the attempt being to get everything down, just name it and there it will be until you pass on to the next place. A poem about my geographical spot sounds like this:

Of Autumn leaves,

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for those children in High School, green
woolen jackets
chasing football up & down field—
North of Long Meadow, Massachusetts
Shafts of Sunlight
Thru yellow millions,
blue light thru clouds,

President Johnson in a plane toward Hawaii, . . .

Up Main Street Northampton,
houses gable sunny afternoon,
Ivy library porch—
Big fat pants, workshirt filled w/leaves,
painted pumpkinshead sitting Roof Corner,
—or hanging from frontyard tree country road—. . .

Entering Whatley,
Senses amazed on the hills,
bright vegetable populations.
hueing rocks nameless yellow.
veils of bright Maya over New England
Veil of Autumn leaves laid over the land,
Transparent blue veil over senses. . . .

I like the childlike freshness of "chasing football up & down field," the perception of Big fat pants, the "bright vegetable populations"; and I'd rather be taken through these towns than some others, though if he wants to get it down right Longmeadow and Whately are the ways to spell 'em. But must I grow reverent about bright Maya over New England when in fact it's an old Jersey-New Yorkite who's brought it here? Often with Ginsberg the solemn and the silly are in too close company for this reader's comfort; it is the lack of complex ideas that for all its incidental virtues finally make his poetry mean less to me than it does to some. But the very idea of reviewing Ginsberg, certainly our most incorrigible poet, has its ludicrous aspect, and I herewith stop only to compliment City Lights for producing such a handsome volume at $2.50.

"In truth I seem to have felt mostly the joys of living; in remembering, in recording, thanks to the gift of the Muse, it is the pain." That final sentence to the "Afterthought" which concluded Robert Lowell's *Notebook* (1970) is absent from the three volumes now published. The outrageous act of publishing all three together sets Lowell apart from other poets who just eke them out one at a time; it also signals a taming and fitting of the burgeoning, much-revised *Notebook* (originally *Notebook* 1967-68) into the order of volumes beginning with

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Lord Weary's Castle. Two years ago, reviewing *Notebook* (*Poetry,* Dec. 1971), I expressed admiration at how much of the world's furniture those sonnets contained, while at the same time bringing to focus the rich inner landscape of darkest Lowell. Yet fascinated as I was and still am by these poems—now revised again, added to, and broken up into three books—I admit the force of what a harsh critic of *Notebook,* Ian Hamilton, had to say when he pointed to "the strenuous but machine-like animation of dead mannerisms" that amounted to self-parody, and when he claimed that Lowell's powers of language "have degenerated into a ready-for-anything rhetorical machine; you name it, I'll write it up with urgent vigour." And that further:

> The real shoddiness of *Notebook* is that time and again it debases into facility the poet's most potent qualities. The tightly conversational voice is frittered into chatter, the heartfelt, in extremis, plaint sounds thin, forced and vain, the appetite for history, for heroes and detritus, becomes gluttonous and indiscriminate.[10]

Reading through the new volumes I can only reply to Hamilton, precisely so, this is often the case; yet the fact that these poems are signed Robert Lowell and are "about" his life in most intimate ways makes Hamilton's criticism something less than the last word about the poems. The shoddiness, the chatter, the forced and vain complaint, the gluttonous, indiscriminate appetite for history and gossip—all that Ian Hamilton names so well could only be so named about a writer with Lowell's provocative powers. The very fact that such naming is important means Lowell's work is even more of an event, more inescapable, and that we are more than ever helpless before it, unable to evade it.

How outrageous it is, for example, to take the beautiful poem "Obit" ("In the end it gets us, though the man know what he'd have") which previously concluded *Notebook,* introduce it with a new single, extra line separated from the sonnet by a space—"Our love will not come back on fortune's wheel"—and make it now the conclusion to the volume *For Lizzie and Harriet.* Its last two lines remain hauntingly the same—"After loving you so much, can I forget/you for eternity, and have no other choice?"—yet now have to be read differently because of what we know of Lowell's life from these books. (I don't of course mean to claim that he's now answered the question for himself and for us.) This is the smallest of the three books, contains only poems, though often revised, that were published before. *History* is by far the largest, eighty new poems, arranged in loose chronology from King David and Achilles to John Berryman and I. A. Richards. This book is the most public of the three, most bristles with Lowell's sense of fact and his heroicizing tendencies, liberally applied to almost everybody. There is much obscurity, much splendid clarity; it is hard

[10] From *A Poetry Chronicle,* by Ian Hamilton (Faber and Faber, 1973).

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to believe that a sonnet can put forth in such unforgettable focus the characters of modern writers and friends. It is a book to spend "such a too long time" with. But I want to spend my short time left here with the third volume, *The Dolphin*, all new poems "For Caroline" as the dedication reads. Yet the voice which speaks in "Records" is clearly "Lizzie's":

> ". . . I was playing records on Sunday,
> arranging all my records, and I came
> on some of your voice, and started to suggest
> that Harriet listen: then immediately
> we both shook our heads. It was like hearing
> the voice of the beloved who has died.
> All this is a new feeling. . . I got the letter
> this morning, the letter you wrote me Saturday.
> I thought my heart would break a thousand times,
> but I would rather have read it a thousand times
> than the detached unreal ones you wrote before—
> you doomed to know what I have known with you,
> lying with someone fighting unreality—
> love vanquished by this mysterious carelessness."

Compared to this sonnet the poems in *Life Studies* were Poems, studied and subtle strategies of revelation and concealment. If for some reason your reviewer had written "Records" no one could care less. Read in the context of *The Dolphin* and accompanying books by Robert Lowell, it wrenches the heart.

But one should feel uneasy about this, should say at some point, yes Lowell has finally gone too far; you can't turn life into literature twenty minutes or a year later; many of these sonnets are almost inaudible, don't rise above a private mumble, resist being dragged into the social relationship of poet and reader. After which we must add that the poet understands all this: ". . . Conscience incurable/ convinces me I am not writing my life;/ life never assures which part of ourself is life." Or in the words from another sonnet, "Everything is real until it's published." It is this "unrealism" (as he termed it in the afterthought to *Notebook*) that Lowell counts upon to save his work from literalism and gross confession by casting the spell of words over life. Norman Mailer's paragraph on this spell cannot be bettered:

> Lowell's poetry gave one the sense of living in a well, the echoes were deep, and sound was finally lost in moss on stone; down there the light had the light of velvet, and the ripples were imperceptible. But one lay on one's back in this well, looking up at the sky, and stars were determinedly there at night, fixed points of reference; nothing in the poems ever permitted you to turn on your face and

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try to look down into the depths of the well, it was enough you were in the well—now, look up! The world dazzled with its detail.

This is why these poems cannot be easily understood or assimilated, and it is not to the point to praise or blame Lowell's craft, use of the medium or whatever. The poetry does not matter; here is the concluding poem, "Dolphin," to show us how much the poetry matters:

> My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise,
> forgetful as Racine, the man of craft,
> drawn through his maze of iron composition
> by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.
> When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body
> caught in its hangman's-knot of sinking lines,
> the glassy bowing and scraping of my will. . . .
> I have sat and listened to too many
> words of the collaborating muse,
> and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
> not avoiding injury to others,
> not avoiding injury to myself—
> to ask compassion. . . this book, half fiction,
> an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting—
>
> my eyes have seen what my hand did.

Who is the person ready to step forward and comment on that?

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Report

The Present Condition of British Poetry

IF THERE IS ONE THING that American reviewers seem to agree about, it is that British poetry is in a bad way. "Flat," "mediocre," and, worst of all, "domestic"—these are only a few of the adjectives they use. Their expressions of distaste come over all the more strongly because of the American habit of letting British books accumulate into great swatches before bundling them into one composite review. One has the impression of the Poetry Critic, be he contributing professor or writer-in-residence, surveying his pile of anaemic dust-jackets and lifting the cover of his typewriter with a sigh.

Now I must admit that the British do little to help here. For one thing, they bring out compilation after compilation purporting to deal with the poetry "scene." All our little magazines of verse are sending out questionnaires to what they conceive to be distinguished writers, asking them if they see anything promising on the horizon. And graciously or ungraciously the Names answer, usually invoking in their replies other Names and the texts associated with them. *Crow* (Ted Hughes), *The Visit* (Ian Hamilton), *Briggflatts* (Basil Bunting), *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool* (Adrian Henri)—such titles occur again and again, and the innocent reader is liable to form the impression that they are what the Doctor ordered. But *Crow, The Visit et al.* are no remedy for a poetic malaise, if indeed there is one. To parade them around as triumphs of writing in Britain is to deserve the sternest reproof of which American criticism is capable.

Viewed from a distance, it must seem that poetry in Britain has divided into two opposed camps. One is, of the provinces, provincial; hearty, demotic, addicted to public appearances and tours around the poetry circuit. The other is, or seems to be, metropolitan; educated at ancient universities; introverted, imagistic. This is the semblance, I should say, and not the reality. The two schools are vocal enough to require description, but it doesn't mean that they deserve applause.

The poetry of the pop-circuit tends to be an amalgam of all the arts whose only common factor is audience. Certainly it is utterance for a public occasion. Jeff Nuttall, describing one such event in his book *Bomb Culture,* says:

> Not only were Trocchi, Corso, Ferlinghetti, Horovitz, Brown, Hawkins, Richter, McGrath, Lacey, Esam, MacBeth, Logue, Hollo, Jandl and Fainlight (the real star of the show) performing

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together but all our separate audience had come to one place at the same time, to witness an atmosphere of pot, impromptu solo acid dances, of incredible barbaric colour, of face and body painting, of flowers and flowers and flowers, of a common dreaminess in which all was permissive and benign.

The flowers date this to 1967. But, though the external trappings vary from trend to trend, the poems remain the same. Many of them seem not so much literary texts as scores for performance—performance, moreover, through microphones, over sound-systems, to huge and excitable audiences. Many of their authors seem to be injecting emotion into the lines they declaim rather than drawing out that which is already there. Even Roger McGough, the showman of the British poetry circuit, is greatly at fault in this. He certainly has a crowd appeal which I can only compare with that of the Beatles in their recital phase of 1962 or thereabouts, and this is not meant as an insult. His "Let Me Die a Youngman's Death" has tremendous charm, especially as spoken by the poet himself. Alas, I can only set down the text.

Let me die a youngman's death
not a clean and inbetween
the sheets holywater death
not a famous-last-words
peaceful out of breath death

When I'm 73
& in constant good tumour
may I be mown down at dawn
on my way home
from an allnight party . . . .

If the Beatles' "When I'm 64" is poetry, so is this. It has the virtue of humour and perhaps the even greater virtue of unpretentiousness. But, like most pop lyric, it will not bear too much repetition. There comes a time after a number of re-readings, or even rehearings, when the puns jar and the jokes begin to pall. 'When I'm 73/& in constant good tumour'—how many times can we bear to hear *that*? And this is pop-poetry at its best.

Adrian Henri is the theorist of this school which he seems to regard as a riposte to an inbred metropolitan ethos. He has many of the same techniques as McGough but takes himself far more seriously. There is much still to be gained from giving Biblical myth a local habitation, but Mr. Henri's "Entry of Christ into Liverpool" handles the myth grossly. He dabbles it, so to speak, in Liverpool's great and polluted river, the Mersey. Christ becomes no more than the urban vulgarity into which he rides.

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COLMANS MUSTARD
J. Ensor, fabriqueur de Masques
HAIL JESUS, KING OF THE JEWS
straining forward to catch a glimpse through the crowd
red hair white robe grey donkey
familiar face
trafficlights zebracrossings

GUIN
GUINN
GUINNESS IS
white bird dying unnoticed in a corner
splattered feathers
blood running merged with
the neon signs
in a puddle . . .

—the tell-tale touch of willed pathos at the end here, Christ as a broken bird, is best placed by comparing it with the cataclysmic end of Eliot's *Gerontion.*

> . . . De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
> Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
> In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
>
> Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
> White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
> And an old man driven by the Trades
> To a sleepy corner . . .

Eliot requires no especial pity for his gull, any more than he does for Gerontion, whose wasted life and loss of identity is his ostensible theme. But in his book, *Tonight at Noon,* Adrian Henri identifies Eliot with Mallarmé and the cult of pure poetry. This is an astonishing judgment, and not one which a reading of *Gerontion* would support. But even leaving that aside, Mr. Henri's prescriptive view of poetry is no less astonishing. He, by his own account, seeks to utilise the whole spectrum of special jargon—"motor-bike specialists, consultant gynaecologists, Beatle fans, the people who write 'Coronation Street' [a British soap-opera], peeping toms, admen, in fact the language of anyone saying anything in English." But the list is not so eclectic as it seems. What particularly interests Henri, as we can see from his poem, is poster-language—the language of hoardings, advertising slogans, television jingles, newspaper headlines, and the like. He does not seem to see that the technique no doubt necessary to phrase a television jingle is harnessed to a concern that is

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not only inartistic but probably anti-art altogether. Characteristically, propagandistic advertising works by associating pleasurable emotions with one product or another, whether they are relevant to that product or not. Whatever its other merits, the work of the copywriter is hardly an act of communication. Wouldn't we be better off in selecting and selecting critically, what we want from the multifarious uses of language in our time? This is not a plea for "pure poetry," whatever that may be, but for more precise techniques of communication. And it seems to me that here one has to bring into play not merely the present but also the past.

There is a tradition of English poetry and it is continuing now. The classics who survive their own time survive as our contemporaries. *Gawaine and The Green Knight* is English at an earlier stage of its development, but the poem says much that is relevant to us and says it in a way which embodies techniques some poets have profitably used. For example, its sprung alliterative metre provides more than a hint for a mode of writing that takes us away from the iambic norm without falling into the poster-language of Henri's *Entry of Christ*. Writers like Henri and his colleagues of the pop-circuit live in a world which begins in 1945 or thereabouts. Therefore they have excised from their possible influences the best that has been experienced and recorded by their predecessors. In effect, they are writers who have lost their memory.

It is the desperately proletarian gestures of the pop-poets that have given the impression that there are two contrasting schools of poetry in Britain. The pop-poets deplore the inbred metropolitan ethos, although they can often be found doing this from metropolitan points of vantage. But there is, no question, a difference of attitude between the provincial circuits and the poets and critics who find their centre of focus in such little magazines as *The Review* and who have access to the columns of such opinion-formers as *The Observer* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. The editor of *The Review* is Ian Hamilton, and there is no doubt that his poetry has brought some extravagant encomia, not least from his own contributors.

> The greatest strength of Hamilton's own poetry lies in its extreme fidelity to personal experience. There goes with this, on the other hand, a wariness of generalisation, public themes and inflated language . . . a limitation, but one which the poet has freely imposed on himself in the name of authenticity. (Colin Falck)

> When the first pre-war Mercedes 646 h.p. cars went racing, a wooden box accompanied them on their travels, and inside the box—finely drawn and glittering—were scores of tiny needle-jets for the carburettors. Hamilton's poems are like these needle-jets; when you read them, you know the car is around somewhere, even if you can't see it. (Clive James)

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I wish even more that American readers would learn to listen to . . . Hamilton. (Jonathan Raban)

The tone of the comments—they are all from a 10th anniversary number of *The Review*—suggests, to the disenchanted ear, that we have a remarkably superior snaffle and bit to put on the horse, if only we could find one. Nobody is going to accuse Mr. Hamilton of being hearty or extrovert, at least so far as his poetry is concerned.

> At four, a line of trucks. Their light
> Slops in and spreads across the ceiling,
> Gleams, and goes. Aching, you turn back
> From the wall and your hands reach out
> Over me. They are caught
> In the last beam and, pale,
> They fly there now. You're taking off, you say,
> And won't be back.
> Your shadows soar.
> My hands, they can merely touch down
> On your shoulders and wait. Very soon
> The trucks will be gone. Bitter, you will turn
> Back again. We will join our cold hands together.
> ("Trucks")

I can do little better than quote here a comment by the young Irish critic Edna Longley. She is describing Mr. Hamilton's work at large, but her remarks show this poem to be representative.

> The average Hamilton poem mentions I, you, hands (pale, cold), hair, sun, (light)—or, in a devastating polarity, night (shadow)—flowers, snow. It turns on a cliff-hanging suspense as to whether the people involved are going to touch each other or not. The interior decoration is as sparse as a Beckett stage-set (bed, wall, window); while outside the pervasive window we can glimpse lawns, trucks, an occasional pathetic fallacy.

Needless to say, Mrs. Longley is not a contributor to *The Review*.

It must not be thought that this is breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. Mr. Hamilton's empire stretches through literary supplements and Sunday papers and is designed to enforce a critical concept upon the reader. His mode may seem to be limited, but a number of younger British poets have attuned to it. Perhaps it may best be defined as a kind of neo-imagism. Ezra Pound's contribution to the old Imagist school before the First World War seems oddly relevant here—"An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." But Pound did not remain within the mode, and

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Eliot far transcended it. Imagism, especially as revived in the 1960's, hardly seems a welcome development of the language that sustained Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope and Wordsworth. But one must admit that Mr. Hamilton uses his neo-imagery with a certain fugitive charm. His followers, however, are less fortunate. Colin Falck, who applauds Mr. Hamilton for his "fidelity to personal experience," has, in the same issue of Mr. Hamilton's magazine, this:

> Slowly, the spring sun
> Lifts the morning mist—
> Dissolving absurdities,
> Teasing the broken lines of greying crosses
> To a Graeco-Roman splendour.
> ("In Brompton Cemetery")

Surely it is obvious that, even as an Imagist poem, this does not work? In so small a compass, all the words should pull together. But we have to imagine an implied metaphor for a sun which can at once "lift" the morning mist and "dissolve" absurdities. And is there not an inherent absurdity in the idea of absurdities being "dissolved"? Mr. Colin Falck is not alone. Another of Mr. Hamilton's protegés, Peter Dale, has this:

> From dreams of you I turn to you
> your fluted thigh along my inner arm
> and ache to dream again.
> ("Dream")

So brief a poem can hardly afford an imprecision. Yet I cannot imagine a *fluted* thigh. Is it fluted in the sense of a pillar or is some musical ambiguity intended? And what is the significance of the odd posture in which the couple seem to be sleeping? No wonder American reviewers consider British poetry to be anaemic. Mr. Hamilton must not put forward as pioneers of poetry a few half-hearted stragglers from the Imagist revolution of 1912.

But Mr. Hamilton's real talent is for journalism, and it is upon this that his empire is founded. Constrained in his poetry, he is vigorous in his prose polemic, and almost all the poets worth reading in Britain have felt his lash upon their shoulders. But his polemic has little to do with literary criticism. In *The Observer,* where he chiefly makes his appearances, he has turned the exigency of space usual in a Sunday newspaper to considerable advantage. Under guise of summing up a poet's work, he all to often presents a pen-portrait of what he takes to be that poet's personality. Thus, over the years, Peter Redgrove has been caricatured as an inebriated drum-major, George MacBeth as a tired old conjuror, Edward Lucie-Smith termed flabby and epicene, Fleur Adcock a skittish schoolgirl and I myself (perhaps I should say) an em-

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bittered junior lecturer passed over for promotion! However, if we look at the texts, the consoling thing is how little the work resembles Mr. Hamilton's characterisation. All these poets have something to say, and Redgrove on his day is the most inventive poet writing in Britain now.

Yet how much of Peter Redgrove's work is known to the American reviewers, those same who agree with Mr. Hamilton about the pernicious anaemia that is said to afflict British poetry? Between 1959 and the present, Redgrove has published six books and they exhibit remarkable colour of language and force of imagination. The poet should not be neglected who can phrase lines and images such as these—

> . . . the paving lies loose for the ants to crawl through
> Weaving and clutching like animated thorns . . .
> . . . the cold virgins like empty bottles left outside in the dew . . .
> . . . God will roast the world like a goose on a spinning spit . . .
> . . . Great square shadows like windows sliding on the mountains . . .
> . . . The sleepy evening sounds of a town on the edge of the country
> With rooks cawing as they settle, the clank of a pail, a snatch of radio music . . .

And before this last is dismissed as a piece of British pastoral, perhaps I should say that, like all the charismatic phrases preceding, it is part of a larger whole. "The House of Taps" appears in Redgrove's most recently published book of verse, *Dr. Faust's Sea Spiral Spirit,* and like much of his work it is concerned with the nature of man in relation to a universe that may or may not be inhabited by God. The "taps" of the title are, in fact, faucets, and the whole world is pictured as a lodging house maintained by the Reverend Earth and Dr. Waters. It is full of taps from which one can extract whatever elixir one chooses, needs or dreads—

> When they give water, these faucets, it is holy water,
> Or river water, with green shadows of great ship-hulls gliding in it.
> There are some also that bundle out exceptional ripe golden cornsheaves
> And blackberries also, and pineapples and nightshade and innumerable other kinds of berries.
> There is a large curved one like morning glory full of strong birdsong
> And the smell of woodsmoke mixed with wet nettles.
> Others I would not turn on again, not if you paid me, there are some
> That throw out glittering lead, or rushes of fire,

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And these are all made of wood, so that they smoke and scorch as they run,
And if they char too far they can never be turned off again.
There is another which is a faucet of pouring darkness, my eyes dim,
I grope, can I ever find it again to stop the darkness coming?
And there is yet another and this is the worst that seems to give out nothing
But when you look round there are certain articles missing.
But mostly they give out good things, sunshine and earth,
Or milk, or fine silky stuffs that glide out rustling,
The sleepy evening sounds of a town on the edge of the country
With rooks cawing as they settle, the clank of a pail, a snatch of radio music . . .

I have stood aside, as long as I dared, and let the poet have his say. The conception commands respect, it seems to me, and so does the execution. The quality may be seen in the verb—the taps that "*bundle* out . . . golden cornsheaves" and "*throw* out . . . rushes of fire." It is also in the precision with which the elixirs are imagined—"the smell of woodsmoke mixed with wet nettles" and "fine silky stuffs that glide out rustling." And this precision is as much a matter of aural and tactile as of visual presentation: there is no place for this poem in any aesthetic of neo-Imagism. The tap which burns itself to the extent that it is too damaged to be turned off and continues burning; the tap which pours out darkness so dense that one cannot grope one's way to turn it off; the tap—most sinister—which does not give out but takes away—this is the dark side of Redgrove's imagination, exploratory and minatory. In spite of his lively sense of the countryside, Redgrove cannot be said to be a pastoral poet. Rather he is aware of the experiences of life, painful as well as appealing, and finds them all of interest. Hence the allegory of the taps, this generous ranging of possibilities—

> In this house of personages that prefer tenants to use the taps and sample the waters
> And best of all to install faucets running with their own personal tastes and choices,
> In the great house of the Reverend Mrs. Earth and Doctor Waters

The conception is simpler and more clear-cut than that of many of Redgrove's poems, and hence relatively easy to quote and to describe. Much of his work is large-scale and highly dramatic in quality. He is at the centre of a growth-area in British poetry whose main equivalents in the States are the lyrical and concentrated short stories of writers such as Elizabeth Bishop, Flannery O'Connor and Mary Gray Hughes. The work of Redgrove, and a number of poets like him, inhabits the

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HUDSON REVIEW 11/73

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hinterland between the long poem and the short story, using the highly charged rhythms of a tradition which has developed through English verse from mediaeval allegory.

I would count no one conversant with what has been happening recently to verse in Great Britain who had not read at least some of the following: "House of Taps," "The Sermon," "The Nature of Cold Weather" (Peter Redgrove); "Illnesses and Ghosts at the West Settlement" (Francis Berry); "Don Senilio" (Martin Bell); "The Songbook of Sebastian Arruruz" (Geoffrey Hill); the Marriage Sequence from "Wintering Out" by Seamus Heaney; "The Return of the Women" by George Mackay Brown; "Travelling Behind Glass" and "Correspondences" by Anne Stevenson. It is true that a number of these authors are only questionably "English." Seamus Heaney is from Mid-Ulster in Northern Ireland; Mackay Brown from the Orkney Islands; Anne Stevenson is an American born in Britain and long resident there. I can think of other leading poets who are Australian, New Zealand, West Indian and Pakistani. This goes to show that Great Britain itself, like its literary tradition, can only remain alive by fresh incursions of vitality from abroad. My sincere regret is that there is not more cultural interplay, at a serious level, between Great Britain and the United States, and this is the real reason why this article got itself written.

But there is no doubt that Britain sells itself short in the international market. Our critics and theorists seem to have let us down. Certainly they have puzzled readers abroad with petty squabbles between this pseudo-school of poets and that. Let us hope that the Americans, with their tradition of great quarterlies which we have lost, will not allow the confusion to persist. The next time an American critic feels impelled to castigate the British books he has under review, perhaps he will bring into question not only those books which have reached him, but those that haven't. He may find what seems to be a pernicious anaemia inhabits only certain areas of our writing.

—PHILIP HOBSBAUM

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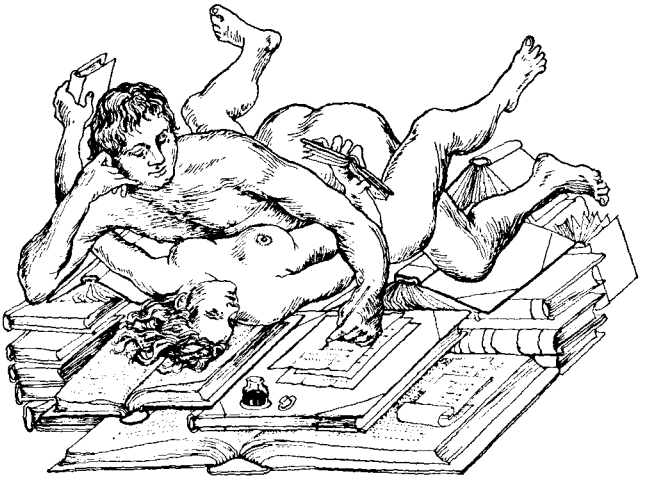

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